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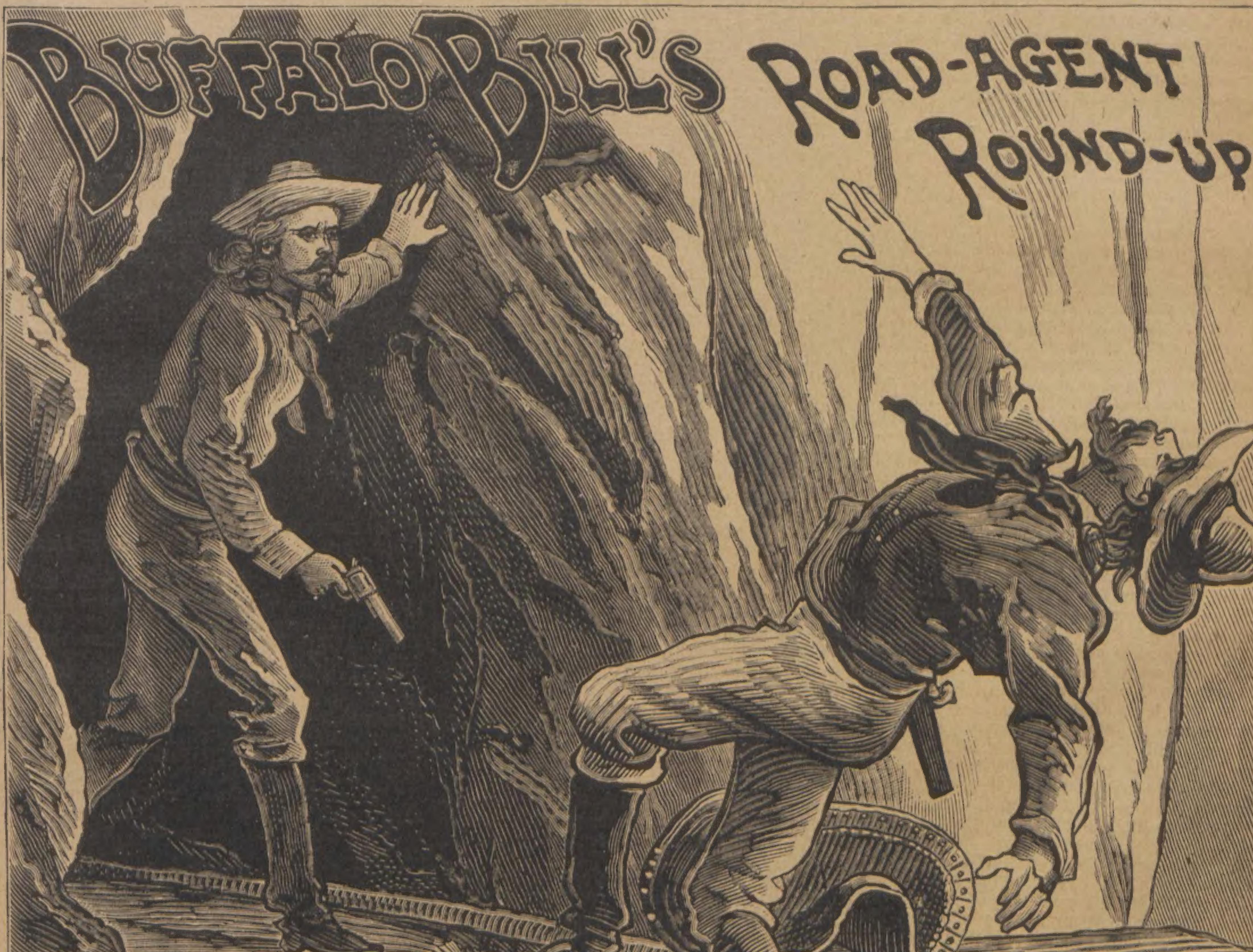
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OR, THE MYSTERIOUS

Masked Man in Black.

BY COL. PRENTISS INGRAHAM,
AUTHOR OF "BUFFALO BILL" NOVELS, ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE TRAITOR'S DOOM.

"THE verdict of your comrades is that you must die, and I therefore pronounce sentence of death upon you."

"The band will draw lots to see which three will get the red ivories that make them the executioners of these men, for in just one-half hour they are to die."

BUFFALO BILL RECEIVED A SEVERE SHOCK WHEN HE SAW THE ROBBER MISS HIS FOOTING AND FALL BACKWARD.

The one who uttered these words, sentencing three fellow beings to death, was masked, not a feature of his face being visible.

The scene was a wild, picturesque one, in a canyon in the high rolling lands of far away New Mexico.

It was night, and several bright fires of logs cast a ruddy light upon the overhanging cliffs on all sides, on the cabins of an outlaw camp, and on the group of men gathered in a semi-circle, facing three prisoners who were in irons, hands and feet.

A score or more men were in the group. They were not masked, save perhaps that their faces were so stamped with evil as to mask every good trait their natures had once possessed.

There were Mexican there, swarthy half-breeds, a negro, two Indians, and specimens of the thorough American desperado, though the sons of the land beyond the Rio Grande predominated.

Two other persons were present besides those in the group and the trio of traitors—one the man who had pronounced the death doom, the other a woman.

It looked strange, indeed, to see a woman in that wild camp of New Mexican outlaws and outcasts, yet there she was, and not by compulsion, for no bonds were about her slender wrists or shapely waist.

She sat by the masked chief, silent, attentive, seeing all, hearing all, yet uttering no word for mercy such as might have been expected from one of her sex for those who had been doomed to die.

Her face was heavily veiled; but, though every feature was hidden, there escaped from beneath the gold embroidered sombrero which she wore a wealth of jet black hair.

Her form, which was slight, yet of graceful outline, was clad in a riding habit of blue velvet; on her hands were gauntlet gloves; but nothing about her indicated her nationality, though the man at her side—the chief—spoke with a decided accent.

Two others were observers and listeners of what was taking place in that canyon camp, though their presence was never suspected by the outlaws grouped about the big log fire.

Over the cliff, a hundred feet above that canyon camp, peered strong, handsome, fearless faces—gazing down upon the scene, their ears alert to catch every word uttered.

They were beyond the arc of firelight, and so were secure from detection, though their faces were revealed by the glow which glimmered upon the shoulder straps of one, stamping him as an army officer, and upon the long hair, silken mustache and imperial of the other—the strikingly handsome face so well known now in the Old World as well as in America, as the Prince of the Plains, Buffalo Bill.

After hearing the words uttered by the masked chief in the canyon below, the two watchers stepped back from the cliff and glided away as silently as specters, while the outlaws prepared for the death scene.

The Woman in Velvet had risen, entered the cabin near, and returned with a black box, a foot square, and with a hole in the top large enough to thrust the hand into.

Upon one side of the box were painted a white skull and crossbones, upon another a nest of green, writhing snakes, and on the third was a red coffin.

The fourth side was turned toward the outlaws and upon it were the words in red:

THE RAFFLE OF DEATH.

The woman placed this box silently upon the table, and stood with one hand resting upon it.

Then one of the group advanced, put his hand into the opening in the top, and, drawing it out, handed something to the woman.

She held it up to the gaze of all, uttering no word, and then motioned to the man to stand aside.

He had drawn a white ivory chip. Another came up and drew, and he also took out a white chip.

Thus they came on, man after man, and drew in this Raffle of Death.

So far, though a dozen had drawn, each one had secured the white chip, which spared him from the executioner's duty.

There sat the three prisoners, silent, attentive, with lips quivering, but uttering no word for mercy.

It made the scene more sad and impressive to gaze into their pallid faces, yet hear no murmur, no appeal, no moan from their lips.

But, when the thirteenth man in the Raffle of Death had also drawn a white chip, they rose instinctively and went forward, to see, to wonder, to wait.

Could it be possible that the woman in velvet, whose duty it was to put the white and red ivory chips in the box, had made a mistake and placed only the white ones there?

Or could it be that she had acted from a prompting of mercy and not placed a red chip in the box?

The doomed men knew their lives were hanging by a thread, for if a mistake was made they were saved.

This was the law of their lawless band. Whether from mercy or by a mistake, if the three red chips were left out, they would not forfeit their lives.

The rest of the band grew uneasy, for those three condemned men were traitors, and if set free might yet betray them.

Those who had not yet drawn, and they were now but few, grew nervous at the thought that they must draw the red chips if such were in the box.

They did not, bad as they were, desire to shoot a man down, as they would have to do, if it fell to their lot as executioners.

At last three only remained to draw, and they hung back until the chief impatiently commanded:

"Draw!"

One stepped forward and thrust his trembling hand into the box.

Withdrawing it, the woman took it, and revealed a red chip.

The spell was broken; the three red chips must be in the box.

CHAPTER III.

THE RAFFLE OF DEATH.

There had been no mistake; the three red chips had been put in the box by the Woman in Velvet, and by a remarkable coincidence, they were the last to be drawn out.

They were taken out by the men to whose lot they fell, with pale faces, while the three doomed outlaws, dashed from hope to despair, dropped back upon their bench, white and quivering.

But they uttered no word, gave no moan of anguish at their terrible fate.

The chief, still impatient, apparently, at delay, said sternly:

"Come! There is no need of delaying longer. If you intend to pray, a short prayer will serve the purpose as well as a long one, and you but prolong your misery."

"Get ready, executioners, and let the work be done at once, for I am anxious to be off."

There was no remonstrance, but the woman walked up to the three doomed men and unlocked the irons upon their wrists and ankles.

There was no fear of escape, no dread of resistance.

She said a few words to them in a low, soothing tone, and then grasped the hand of each.

Then one of the outlaws led them beneath a tree, where the firelight fell full upon them, and the three executioners stepped to a spot ten feet from them, and facing them.

The three executioners stood with their backs to the fire and eyes cast down.

The condemned stood with staring eyes, gazing upon the fire, the group of outlaws, the woman and the chief, with a hapless look.

The center one of the three was a tall man, with a dark, evil face. He it was who had led the party, five in all, in the act of treachery against the band—their crime being that they had, in disguise, held up and robbed a coach, killed the driver, and wounded an army officer, yet planned to keep what they had secured for themselves, and not to allow the chief and their comrades to know of their secret act of lawlessness.

"Have you any request to make, men?" called out the chief.

One had, he said. He would tell his executioner.

It was the tall man who spoke, and he said aloud:

"We are guilty, yes, and there were five of us.

"One was killed by Buffalo Bill in Herders' Ranch, one escaped, and we three are to die now; but, Captain Cobra, I warn you and your band, that the one who escaped, my brother, will fully and surely avenge my death."

"I have only a word of direction to give to the man there who sends me out of life, and I am ready."

His calm manner was worthy of one dying in a better cause—his fearlessness in the face of death worthy of a better life.

The executioner appointed to kill him stepped forward, the doomed man whispered a few words in his ear, and then the chief impatiently gave the word:

"Now let there be no further delay."

The Woman in Velvet did not move; her veiled face was turned upon the doomed three, but whether her eyes were upon them or closed to shut out the awful scene, none could tell.

"All ready, senor," said the outlaw under officer, who had placed the men in position.

"Ready!"

The three executioners drew their revolvers at the command of Captain Cobra.

"Fire!"

Three weapons flashed together.

One of the three men fell heavily and lay motionless. A second uttered a cry and staggered back, until the man who had fired upon him fired twice very rapidly; then he, too, fell.

The third sank upon his knees, and a second shot pierced his body when he was in that supplicating position.

But there was no cry for mercy from any of them.

"Lopez, you did you work well, for you killed Joe Nichols with one shot; the others were bunglers," said the chief, and, leaving the three men where they had fallen, he continued:

"Now, I wish to say to you that with Lem Nichols at large, the brother of that man whose threat you all just heard, we are no longer safe here, especially as the great scout, Buffalo Bill, was ordered to Fort Taos purposely to hunt us down."

"We will, therefore, break camp tonight, and disband until I call you together again; but when that will be I do not know."

"Now I shall go with a dozen men to strike one more blow, and then the Cobras are scattered until called again into the saddle."

He said no more, but soon after rode out of the canyon with a dozen men at his back.

The Woman in Velvet retired into her cabin and closed the door, while the men, left in their camp, one by one went to their quarters for the night.

The bodies of the three traitors had been left where they had fallen, for burial on the morrow, and lay there with the dying firelight casting flickering shadows about them.

An hour passed and the canyon was as still as the dead. The fire burned low and failed to cast more than a faint glow about it; but that glow was sufficient to see that one of the three bodies moved.

A head was raised, a white face glared over the scene; then the tall form of Sol Nichols arose and stole silently away in the shadows, gliding down the canyon in the direction of the corral where the horses of the band were kept.

Another of those five traitors had escaped death, and was at large.
Sol Nichols was to be his own avenger.

CHAPTER III. THE UNSEEN AVENGER.

Upon a rugged stage trail, running from Herders' Ranch to Fort Summer, in New Mexico, on the morning after the execution of the outlaws in their secret retreat, two men parted company, one going to the eastward, the other to the westward.

One was dressed in the uniform of an officer of cavalry, the other wore the picturesque costume of an army scout.

They were the same two who had the night before looked down over the cliff into the stronghold of the outlaw band.

Now they had parted company, upon the stage trail, and while Buffalo Bill, leading a pack horse, rode on toward Herders' Ranch, Lieutenant McKenny Willis was going to Fort Summer.

For some miles the young and handsome officer had ridden along at a brisk pace, his mind busy upon certain adventures he had passed through the week past, and the claim he had won for promotion, when suddenly, as he was riding along, among a perfect wilderness of rocks, picking his way slowly, for the way was rugged, a loud voice shouted:

"Halt right thar', for I has my rifle covering you!"

Lieutenant Willis, though noted for his dash and utter fearlessness, was a man of sound sense as well, and he saw how thoroughly at the mercy of the man he was who ordered him to halt.

If he spurred forward in a bold attempt to escape, his horse would surely fall upon the rugged rocks and perhaps kill him.

If he drew his revolver, upon whom could he fire, for his foe was unseen?

Then, too, he could but believe that the one who halted him had help near.

Fortunately, he was not burdened just then with much money; he had his watch, only a silk ribbon attached, a pair of sleeve buttons and a ring, with a few dollars in his pocket.

So he wisely made no resistance, and called out:

"Well, I have halted. What now?"
"You knows Buffalo Bill, ther scout—remember my rifle covers yer, though you don't see me."

"All right, I'll not forget. Yes, I know Buffalo Bill."

"He came to Fort Taos to run down the outlaw band under Captain Cobra."

"Well, grant that he did?"

"He's been hot on their trail, and if I mistakes not, you is helping him?"

"I am doing my duty as well as I can in that direction."

"Well, I'm one of ther Cobras."

"I guessed as much when you held me up."

"But I'm in hidin' now."
"I see that you are."

"I doesn't mean from you, only, but from ther Cobras."

"Ah!"
"I was one of the five who held ther Fort Summer coach up leetle over a week ago, kilt ther driver, wounded Captain Baring, and made a big haul in money."

"You ought to be hanged."

"It's catchin' afore hangin', mister."

"Yes, and every dog has his day; you are having yours now."

"I hain't goin' ter quarrel with yer, fer I means business, and wants ter talk."

"Go ahead."

"One of we five fellers was kilt by Buffalo Bill in the Broadaxe saloon, at Herders' Ranch, when my brother, Sol Nichols, who led ther gang, was playing a game with a young rancher and Lieutenant Balfour, from Fort Summer, chipped in."

"He was right, for he saw that your brother was playing with the very money he had robbed Captain Baring of."

"He attempted to arrest him, and the man, Buffalo Bill, drew his revolver to

kill the lieutenant, but the scout was too quick for him."

"Oh, I were thar', and seen it all, and knows that they captured my brother; but I lit out and is a hidin', and what I has ter say are this."

"Yer see, ther lieutenant were takin' my brother Sol ter Fort Summer when Captain Cobra rescued him."

"He didn't do it from no wish ter hev' Sol free, for he hed ther other two safe, and wanted ter kill them, fer yer see we hed broke ther laws o' ther band in holdin' up ther coach as we hed done."

"Now, they will be executed, and I alone escapes, and I loves my brother, while, ef they catches me I passes in my chips too, do yer see?"

"Yes, I see."

"Now, lieutenant, what I wants is fer you to tell Buffalo Bill, ef he will meet me right here, two nights from this, or three, or four, as yer may not find him easy, and ter bring along with him a good band o' fighters, I'll guide him to the secret nest of ther Cobras."

"Why do you do this?"

"For several reasons.
"Yer see, I wants ter save Sol if I can, and you has got ter promise for Buffalo Bill that my brother and me goes free, in return for what I does."

"Suppose they have killed your brother?"

"Then I wants ter avenge him," was the reply uttered in a savage tone.

"All right, you will betray the stronghold of the Cobras, in return for your brother's life, or to avenge him, if dead, and your own freedom."

"Yes, sir, along with horses for both Sol and me, and our outfits."

"Buffalo Bill is to meet you here the third, fourth or fifth night from this?"

"Yes, sir."

"I will tell him, and if he does not agree to your terms he will not be here."

"If he does, he will come to meet you—good-day," and the lieutenant rode on, not once having seen the unseen avenger.

CHAPTER IV.

THE COLONEL AND THE SCOUT.

Seated in the headquarters of Fort Taos, New Mexico, some ten days after the scene in the secret camp of the outlaw band known as El Cobras, and the worst lot of miscreants that had ever disgraced and overrun a new country, were three persons.

One was the commandant of the fort, Colonel Nelson Kane, a fine-looking man of fifty, and as fine a soldier and genial a gentleman as ever wore an eagle upon his shoulder straps.

Another was Lieutenant McKenny Willis, the handsome young lieutenant already twice presented to the reader as overlooking the outlaw stronghold, and being held up on the trail to Fort Summer by an unseen foe.

The lieutenant was commanding Troop A of the —th Cavalry, at Taos, and had lately rendered such distinguished services against the Comanches that he stood a fair chance of being advanced to a captaincy, as his captain had just been retired as a confirmed invalid.

The third of the group was Buffalo Bill, of whom a description would be useless, as his well-known face and form are now known the world over, though at the time of which I write he was winning the name by his daring deeds as scout, guide and Indian fighter, which afterward made him so famous, and with just claim to the distinction.

The scout had formerly served with Colonel Kane in the Northwest, and when Captain Cobra and his band became the curse of the New Mexican trails, and no one seemed able to run them down, he had been asked for by the commandants of Taos and Summer, as the very man to track the lawless El Cobras to their lair.

"Well, Cody, I do not know how to express my gratitude to you for the grand services you have rendered and accomplished in so short a time."

"Here we have been struggling for a

couple of years with that band, and you, in as many months, have broken them up," asserted the colonel.

"It was good luck, colonel, rather than good management, for you remember my fortune began when I was able to save that beautiful Woman in Velvet from being run over by the herd of stampeding steers, and who you afterwards told me was the leader of the outlaws, and known as the Queen of the Gold Trail."

"This beautiful trinket she gave me," and he placed his hand upon a unique and remarkable badge and pin upon his left breast, a diamond owl with opal eyes, to which was suspended a band of rubies holding a skull of pearls, and then continued:

"Which she called a Death Charm; but, whatever its virtues may be under ordinary tests, certainly it did protect me from being killed by the Cobras, though really nothing but sheer good luck enabled me to catch a Mexican belonging to the band and get him to tell me for his life the secret of how to reach the unknown stronghold, which Lieutenant Willis and I visited, and thus I learned how to lead a force against it."

"Yes, and I would have had the man who held up the lieutenant here, guide you there had it not been that you already knew the way. But I do not regard it all as luck, Cody, and though you found the Queen, Captain Cobra and the men all gone when you revisited their stronghold, I feel that you drove them to disband, and compelled the chief to publish the proclamation he did, that El Cobras would no longer haunt the trails."

"No, you are too modest by half, for it was all through you that they were forced to disband, and we are freed of their lawless acts."

"Colonel Kane, do you know I do not believe that they have disbanded?"

"Do you mean it, Cody?"

"I do, sir."

"What reason have you for believing so?"

"Well, sir, with the disbanding of El Cobras my work here at Fort Taos is supposed to end."

"Yes." "You say that I caused the disbandment, and Captain Cobra said as much in his proclamation, which was nailed upon the door of the Broadaxe saloon at Herders' Ranch."

"That is true." "The chief knew that I was hunting him, but he also knew that out of the five men who held up the Summer coach, one was killed, and the others he had executed; but one of the gang escaped."

"That one, as I have heard it, a brother to Lem Nichols, whom the chief had shot as a traitor, is a revengeful and bad man, and those who knew him predicted that he would betray the band to avenge his brother, for the two were strangely attached to each other."

"Well, Cody?" "This may have influenced Captain Cobra in disbanding, but I do not believe he is sincere."

"He merely, in my opinion, wishes to gain time to seek other retreats, and give a feeling of confidence to all those who send funds by the coaches and travel, and, if you wish me to say so, for me to return to my post in the Northwest, and then, having reorganized his band, he will sally forth and strike some terrible blow, getting a large sum of money by doing so."

"By Joye! I believe you are right, Cody."

"Yes, sir; I think as you do," added Lieutenant Willis.

"Now, my plan, Colonel Kane, is to let all believe I have started for the Northwest, while I really go into some hidden camp and watch and await developments, my stay in New Mexico known but to

those you desire to be in the secret, and to one or two whom I wish to have as spies in Herders' Ranch.

"Then, sir, I think you will find that it will not be very long before the outlaws show their cloven hoofs again."

"I begin now to see it as you do, Cody, and it shall be as you wish."

"Then, sir, I will leave the fort tomorrow, apparently, for my Northwestern post."

"Do so, and we'll note the result," was the answer, and the colonel added, with a smile:

"Whatever comes up I shall expect your Death Charm, given you by the Queen of the Trail, to protect you and give you good luck, as you call it, the same as in the past."

CHAPTER V. THE SECRET CAMP.

Buffalo Bill rode away from the fort mounted upon his favorite horse Pard, and with a fine match for him, Comrade, serving as a pack animal.

The courtesies extended to a commissioned officer were given him, and he was followed by the cheers of the scouts and soldiers.

As he left Taos, he took the trail toward Santa Fe, but, after going a few miles, he turned squarely off to the left and began to flank around toward the Comanche country.

This way he kept up until he had gotten around to a point between Fort Taos and Herders' Ranch, the settlement in that part of the country where cattlemen, miners, the stage hands and storekeepers had congregated, with a large portion of the wilder kind of an element, gamblers and toughs, who hang about a frontier camp, for "The Ranch," as it was generally called, was nothing more than a camp of log cabins grouped about the Overland stage station.

To the southwest of the place where Buffalo Bill had camped lay Fort Summer, and thus he was the center of the triangle formed by the settlement and the two forts.

The country was rolling, well watered, heavily timbered in places, and grass grew abundantly, while game was plentiful and frequently lured the wily Comanches from their villages in the mountains to hunt there.

The stage trail to Fort Summer ran not very many miles from the scout's camp, and the stage trail to Fort Taos was about the same distance in another direction, with both posts and Herders' Ranch within half a day's hard ride of him.

The spot chosen for his secret camp was a canyon putting back from the river, and where there was nothing to take any one unless it was a hunter looking for game.

It was in the spring of the year, and the nights were at times chilly, so the scout made a shelter for himself, gathered wood in plenty, and made himself comfortable in his lone camp, expecting that his stay would continue several weeks.

Though Lieutenant Willis had lately given the Comanches two severe whippings, Buffalo Bill was anxious to keep his eyes open for any move a band of braves might secretly make, so as to give warning in time.

He was about in the center of the country in which the outlaws had operated also, so he could see if any movements were on foot to reorganize the band for further lawless deeds.

There were but few persons to be made acquainted with the fact that Buffalo Bill had not returned to the Northwest, these being the two fort commanders, Lieutenants Willis and Balfour, respectively at Taos and Summer, Scouts Brazos Ben and Dot Driver at Taos, Lem Luby, the driver of the coach to Summer; Ned Nordeck, driver of the weekly coach to Fort Taos, and Jack Tobin, the boss of Herders' Ranch, and who was stage agent, postmaster, landlord of the tavern, keeper of the bar and gambling den known as the Broadaxe Saloon, and who was known as Broadaxe Jack from the fact that he had once quelled a disturbance with a

broadaxe, and afterward considered it his trade-mark.

Not very far from the scout's secret camp, and half a mile from the ford, which the trail between Taos and Herders' Ranch crossed, there was a mystery which he wished to solve.

It was the mystery of a grave.

Corralled by a band of Comanches one day, Buffalo Bill had found a safe retreat in an empty grave.

It was apparently newly dug, and here he had stood and fought until rescued by Lieutenant Willis and a party of troopers.

For whom the grave had been dug was a mystery, and the slain Comanches buried in it had been soon thrown out and the grave left as before.

Several times Buffalo Bill had placed in it logs and dirt, and each time all had been removed, until one day he had found a warning there that it was kept empty by an avenger who had dug it for one who had wronged him, and for whom he was looking, to kill and bring there.

But there was the warning that it must not again be disturbed by the one who had several times done so.

It was in the hope of finding out who this avenger was that Buffalo Bill had camped near enough to visit the grave and thus keep watch.

Having spent a day idly in camp, Buffalo Bill decided to go on foot to the empty grave the next morning, fill it in with logs and dirt, and then return by night to keep watch.

The grave was located upon the river bank, in a grove of timber, and overlooking a small valley.

When he arrived there Buffalo Bill found it empty.

Several logs and a quantity of dirt were thrown into it, and then the scout started back for his camp.

Late in the afternoon he led his horses to water, staked them out in a good pasture, and set off for the grave, armed with his rifle, belt of arms, lariat, and a blanket.

He arrived there soon after sunset, and, to his surprise, found that it was empty again.

Disappointed, he filled it in once more, and then lay down near it to watch.

The night passed, and no one came.

He waited until nearly noon, and, knowing that his horses demanded his care, he returned to his camp, but was back again at the grave within three hours.

Again it was empty.

CHAPTER VI. THE MYSTERIOUS STRANGER.

The coach to Taos arrived on time at Herders' Ranch, and one passenger was on the box with Nordeck, and dismounted to enjoy one of the good meals which Broadaxe Jack's tavern was noted for.

He was a man not of the Far West, it was certain, but tall, well formed, and distinguished looking.

His face was a fine one, yet was marred by a cynical look hovering about the mouth that at times was bitter and cruel, so intense it became.

Well dressed, he looked like a Southern planter, and Ned Nordeck said that he was down on the books as

DR. EDGAR DRAYTON,

Alabama.

Ned Nordeck further stated that the stranger talked well, was apparently a rich man, and stated that he came West on a special mission, but what that was the passenger did not say.

The stranger took out a well-filled pocket-book to pay for his meal, lighted a fragrant cigar and handed one to Ned, and then mounted the box again, and the coach rolled on, six fresh horses having replaced the tired ones.

The traveler seemed much interested in the country and its people, and asked many questions about the dwellers in that remote land, suddenly making the query:

"Do you know a man here by the name of Tyler Tatnal, driver?"

"I doesn't, by that name; but what does he call himself out in these parts?"

"I know of no other name that he has."

"I guess he don't hang out around here."

"Yes, he does."

"Never heard of him; but maybe some one at the fort can tell you, for he might be a soldier."

"He is no soldier."

"What does he do?"

"Nothing, that I know of, for he is rich."

"The only rich man I knows of, save several officers at the fort, that is, who has money without working for it, is Taylor Travis."

"Who is he?"

"A young ranchero south of Herders' Ranch."

"He has a large ranch, plenty of cattle, and money to throw to the birds."

"Taylor Travis, you say is his name?"

"Yes, sir."

"Describe him, please."

"He is what some folks call a pretty man, but he's not one to fool with, though he's powerful handsome, and all the ranch girls is dead gone on him, though he gambles and is a little rapid, they say."

"But he can throw a lariat with any Mexican, outride a Comanche, and shoot with any Texan; in fact, he is a Texan."

"He is not the man, for the one I speak of is about my age, forty, and is, or was, a handsome, polished gentleman."

"He don't hang out here, as I told you."

"We shall see, for, though I booked with you to Taos, I expect to meet him somewhere upon the road between here and the fort."

Ned Nordeck looked at the passenger suspiciously.

He had known of well-dressed men who had been passengers on coaches, who had met friends on the trail who had proven to be outlaws, and, after robbing the stage, had quietly disappeared.

Could it be that this fine-looking gentleman was a road-agent in disguise?

Ned hoped not, for he had along quite a valuable freight for Fort Taos.

Determined to watch his passenger closely, Ned drove along, leading him to talk, yet getting nothing from him that would in any way cast suspicion upon him of being other than he appeared—a gentleman.

But the more Ned studied his face with sly glances, the more he disliked that cynical look on the man's face.

"Were you ever out West before?" Ned asked.

"Never."

"Expect to settle here?"

"I may."

"You may live here, then?"

"I may die here."

"Yer may, if ther road-agents holds us up or yer is suffering from heart trouble."

"I am in perfect health now, but there is no telling how long before I have heart trouble, while, as for road-agents, I have but a few hundreds and some jewelry with me, hardly enough to tempt your robbers of New Mexico, from what I hear of them."

"Maybe you have friends at the fort?"

"Not that I am aware of."

"Interested in mining, maybe?"

"Not in the least."

"Going to cattle raising?"

"No."

"Another store in Herders' Ranch would pay, for the place is growing."

"There is room for it; but I shall not open a store."

"Going to remain long?"

"I may go back with you, or I may, as I said, die here."

"I shall start back in two days."

"I will be ready any time, if I am alive."

Ned Nordeck did not like the stress the stranger put upon the possibility of his dying out West; it seemed to smack of trouble.

But he drove on, and as his passenger had relapsed into silence, he could only watch him closely, and he saw that he was constantly watching the trail ahead on both sides.

Suddenly, just after the coach had crossed the river ford, loud came the command:

"Halt!"

"I've business with that coach!"

CHAPTER VII.

THE MASKED MAN IN BLACK.

Ned Nordeck drew rein involuntarily, for he had lived long enough on the frontier to know what just such a summons meant.

He was well aware that if he did not obey the command a bullet through the head or heart would put an end to his usefulness in this vale of tears.

So he drew rein, casting a reproachful look at his passenger, as though to say:

"I knew it, and you such a nice gentleman, too."

Then Ned looked for the Cobras to appear, from five to fifteen in number.

Instead, a man stepped from the thicket alone.

To the surprise of Ned Nordeck, he was dressed in a suit of black, frock coat, pants, and slouch hat, all of the same somber hue.

And, more, he wore a black mask that completely hid his face, and even neck, while his hands were encased in black kid gloves.

Ned was surprised, but he made no effort to drive on, for the Masked Man in Black carried a rifle across one arm, and had a belt of arms strapped around his waist.

Advancing to the heads of the leaders, he called out:

"Do not be alarmed, Ned Nordeck, that you may lose your gold or freight, for I am no trail thief."

"My business is with that gentleman."

"You mean to say you will rob him, but not the coach?" said Ned, in amazement.

"I did not say that I would rob him, I remarked that my business was with him, not you."

Ned Nordeck glanced toward his passenger.

There was no change in his face, unless it was that the cynical look had increased to one that was cruel.

He was smoking one of his fragrant cigars, and taking it from his lips, affirmed rather than asked:

"You are Tyler Tatnal?"

"Yes."

"And you are Doctor Edgar Drayton?"

"I am."

"You received my communication?"

"My being here is proof of it."

"You did not come as at first I expected."

"I was necessarily detained, as I wrote you."

"Are you alone?"

"Save for this gentleman on the box with me."

"You understand all that your coming means?"

"I do."

"And come prepared as I demanded in my first letter to you?"

"I do."

"Very well. I am ready."

Ned Nordeck had listened with deepest interest to every word uttered by the two men.

What could it mean?

The passenger on the box with him was calm, still smoked his cigar, but the look on his face deepened with cruelty.

The other had now approached the coach and stood by the side of the off wheeler.

Ned was confident now that he was alone, and seemed half tempted to draw his revolver and open upon him.

But he wished to see what the end of this strange meeting would be.

So he calmly watched and awaited developments.

When the Masked Man in Black said that he was ready, the passenger turned to Ned, and said, courteously:

"See here, my friend, I have a favor to ask of you."

"Let her go, pard."

"I am a stranger to you, you to me; but I know that you men of the frontier can be trusted."

"Some can, more can't."

"You are one who can."

"I hope so."

"I have here a wallet, in which are my name and address, and a letter already written and directed, as well as stamped, for I prepared for this meeting."

"Yes, pard."

"There are several hundred dollars in the wallet which you can keep, or turn over to any one more needy than yourself."

"Guess I can find poor fellows ter help along, for I'm not suffering, pard, though I thanks you."

"As you please, but the money is yours, only send the letter as addressed, should anything happen to me, for this gentleman, who, for some reason best known to himself, has masked his face, has a grievance to settle with me."

"It's a fight, pard?"

"Yes, you might call it so, but I regard it as a duel to the death, for I have come many a long mile to meet this gentleman, at his demand by letter, and he has been waiting for me for quite a time."

"But I am here at last, so he will not be disappointed."

"Is you going to fight here?"

"Yes; I believe he so wishes."

"I do," said the masked man in black.

"Say, Pard Afraid-to-show-ye'r-face, who be you, anyhow?" asked Ned, suddenly.

"That is my own affair."

"Had I not wished to remain unknown I should not have worn this mask," was the stern reply.

"He is the gentleman I asked you about and his name is Tyler Tatnal."

"That's his name, is it?"

"Yes."

"I doesn't know him by that handle, but ef I could pull that mask off I'd know him maybe."

"To attempt it would be to throw your life away."

"I'm too old to be doing fool things on account of curiosity, so don't get scared."

"Are you ready, Doctor Drayton?" impatiently said the masked man.

"Oh, yes," and Doctor Drayton leaped to the ground, but said:

"You, my friend, will see fair play in this duel?"

"You bet I will, and I means it," and, wrapping his reins around his lantern, Ned Nordeck also leaped to the ground.

CHAPTER VIII.

TO FIGHT TO THE DEATH.

"There will be fair play, never fear," said the masked man, quietly, as Ned leaped from the box.

"I desire to see the face of the man I am to fight," said Doctor Drayton, advancing toward his adversary.

"I will not unmask before Ned Nordeck, for I wish to remain unknown in this affair; but I will turn my back on him and allow you to see my face."

"That will satisfy me, for I neither wish to kill or be killed by the wrong man."

The man in black replied:

"There is no mistake, as you will see."

"Each of us knows the game he seeks."

"See!"

He had turned his back upon Nordeck, and then raised his mask so that Doctor Drayton could see his face.

For fully a quarter of a minute—it seemed much longer to Ned Nordeck—the two men gazed into each other's face.

Each man seemed to read in the look of the other all there was of hatred, to review the past, while beholding the countenance of the other, and to feel that whatever the cause that brought about that strange meeting in far away New Mexico, there was a certainty that both were in deadly earnest—that only one must leave the spot alive.

"Come, gents, I've got ter hump ahead, and though you may be anxious ter live as long as you can, I've the schedule time ter run on, when ther Cobras don't break in upon me, though, being as I hain't held up ter be robbed this time, I can give yer a few minutes."

"We will not delay you long, Nordeck."

"As you are to be witness see that each of us gains no advantage."

"What will be your weapon, Doctor Drayton?"

"A revolver."

"That will suit me, though weapons are

immaterial to me, whether rifles, revolvers or knives."

"This is no butchery, and I have not lived in the Wild West long enough to accustom myself to knife encounters," replied Doctor Drayton, with a sneer.

"Revolvers, then, are the weapons."

"Can I offer you a choice of my revolvers, that are tried and true?"

"Thank you, no; for I came provided," and, stepping to the coach, he took out a gripsack, opened it, and selected one of two revolvers that were there, remarking quietly:

"I have novels here I brought to read on the way. If I fall, take them, for they may interest you."

"Thank you, I will, and shall enjoy them, as my library out here is limited."

"If you live—yes."

"Who knows?"

"But a few minutes will tell."

"Ned Nordeck, step off ten paces, for I suppose that distance will suit you, doctor?"

"Oh, yes."

"And you will give the word, Nordeck, as follows:

"Are you ready? Fire! One, two, three!"

"We are to fire between the words fire and three, but should either one of us draw trigger before the word fire, you are at liberty to shoot him down."

"Does that suit you, doctor?"

"Perfectly, Mr. Tatnal."

"See here, gents. I don't know as I'm doing just the square thing to let this fight take place here on the trail," urged Ned Nordeck, suddenly.

"And see here, Ned Nordeck, if you attempt in any way to interfere, I will send a bullet through your brain," sternly said the Masked Man in Black.

Ned was not disturbed by this threat, but replied:

"I don't know whether you will or not, for we are two ag'in' you."

"If you are counting me as one, friend Nordeck, you make a mistake, for I would take no underhand advantage of this gentleman," quickly said Doctor Drayton.

"Then you wants ter fight this duel, doctor?"

"That is the purpose that brought me to New Mexico."

"And you wants ter, masked man?"

"I intend to, for it has been the wish of my life, for years, so if you wish to keep out of trouble do not interfere."

"I guess I had better keep out, then, and I will."

"Just fight it out your own way, for I don't want no trouble with the stage company for helping two durned fools to kill themselves."

"You refuse to act for us, then?"

"I does; but I'll see that neither of you play a trick game on t'other."

"Very well."

"Doctor, as our second shirks the responsibility, I propose that we stand back to back, step off at one, count aloud together five paces, wheel at five, and open fire, pulling trigger until one of us is dead, whether wounded or not."

"Is that satisfactory?"

"Perfectly."

"I am easily pleased in this duel with you."

"Then get your weapon ready, please, for I have had mine in condition for years."

Doctor Drayton looked carefully at his revolver, seemed pleased with it, stepped toward the spot where they were to stand, turned, and, grasping Ned Nordeck's hand, said:

"If I fall, this is good-by, my friend, and you will remember about the letter?"

"I will, and I wants ter say right here, while yer is both alive ter hear me, that you two is ther gainest fellows I ever run acrost in all my travels."

CHAPTER IX.

THE DUEL.

Ned Nordeck was sincere in his praise of the two men.

Calm, even smiling, yet bitterly cynical,

Doctor Edgar Drayton seemed to have not the slightest fear of the consequences.

The Masked Man in Black was stern, yet as cool as though there was no shadow of death hovering over him.

Every arrangement had been effected with the most matter-of-fact indifference and agreed to with a courtly manner that showed Doctor Drayton as willing to enter into the deal of death as was the Masked Man in Black to force it upon him.

The moment all of the preliminaries were made, and Doctor Drayton bade farewell to Ned Nordeck, they stepped to their places.

Then the driver could not refrain from a slight fling at the masked man, whom he could not forgive for hiding his face.

"Say, masked man, you hain't told me good-by, yet."

"I have no last words to offer, no directions to give, no farewells to say."

"I have not the remotest idea of departing this life for a long time to come, Ned Nordeck."

"You sing mighty loud, pard, but a bullet can choke off life mighty quick, and I thought if you did go under you might say what you wished me to do, or let me know beforehand who you was."

"If I fall, you are free to look at my face."

"As to my body, feed it to the coyotes, for, with life gone from it, it is but clay."

"Are you ready, Doctor Drayton?"

"Most certainly."

The doctor had lighted a fresh cigar, and stood at ease, listening to what took place between the masked man and the driver.

With this reply his adversary stepped to the spot where the doctor stood, and each gave the other another long look.

Then they stepped into position, back to back.

The doctor then quietly took his cigar from between his lips, knocked the ashes off, and, handing it to Ned Nordeck, said, in his pleasant way:

"Please hold this for a moment for me, Mr. Nordeck."

"Well, I be durned!" ejaculated Ned, utterly amazed at the coolness of the doctor, and his words brought a light laugh from beneath the black mask, as though the unknown was really amused.

Ned said no more, but stood silently gazing upon the two men, as they stood back to back.

Then the masked man called out:

"Ready!"

"Yes."

"Count!"

"One! two! three! four! five!"

They stepped off quietly at the word one, and calling the numbers together, kept steady pace.

As the word "Fire" was upon their lips, they wheeled about like automata; each man took in the distance, his adversary's form, and the spot he intended to aim at at a glance.

Their revolvers rose together, their fingers touched trigger, and there was one explosion.

Ned Nordeck uttered an exclamation of surprise, as he saw Doctor Drayton drop his weapon and sink helplessly to the ground.

Springing toward him, he turned him over, and beheld a round mark in the very center of his forehead.

The bullet had pierced his brain, the aim had been most deadly.

Ned looked up at the masked man, and said, sadly:

"He is dead."

"Of course."

"You are a dead shot, mister."

"He was the deadliest of dead shots, too."

"Look at his revolver."

"It missed fire," said Ned, taking the weapon from the ground.

"His was the fault, then, for he brought the weapons with him, and had confidence in them, he said."

"My God! Mister, ther weapon was not loaded!" cried Ned Nordeck to the Masked Man in Black, and he held the revolver toward him.

The man in black started visibly at the words of the driver, and, stepping forward, grasped the revolver.

Looking at it, he said slowly, and in a low tone, as though speaking more to himself than to Ned Nordeck:

"The weapon is new, and has never been fired."

"Edgar Drayton had tired of life, and came here for me to kill him."

"It was almost a case of suicide on his part."

"So let it be, for the result is the same."

Ned was gazing upon the masked face as though trying to penetrate it.

"Well, poor man, his life has been snuffed out."

"I'll take his body on to the fort for burial."

"You will do nothing of the kind."

"Will yer bury it here?"

"That is none of your business, Ned Nordeck."

"You can take the effects of the dead man, yes, and send the letter as he requested, but I will take charge of the body."

"I don't know about—"

Ned paused, for the revolver of the Masked Man in Black was covering him, the muzzle looking squarely into his eyes.

CHAPTER X.

NORDECK'S FRUSTRATED INTENTION.

The driver of the coach to Taos was no coward.

No one would have dared hint as much to him.

But when he saw the lightning-like movement with which the man in black had drawn his revolver and covered him, when he saw the muzzle looking straight into his eyes, held in a hand as firm as a rock, he decided that discretion was the better part of valor, and so said:

"You took his life, and now you want the body?"

"That is just it, and as surely as I took his life I shall take his body—that is a part of my creed."

"Well, I never quarrel with a loaded weapon that has got a man at the other end of it."

"Take the body."

"And you take all of his effects."

"Search the body, and see that nothing is left."

"You hain't on ther road-agent racket a little bit?"

"No; I care only for what is my own."

"Now, if you are in a hurry, search the body, take the effects, and by brisk driving you can make up for lost time."

Ned Nordeck took the hint, and a search of the body revealed that the man wore the finest linen, his watch and chain were of the costliest manufacture, his seal ring and sleeve-buttons were massive, and he had a wallet with several hundred dollars and some papers.

Ned put all into the grip, and the Masked Man in Black remarked:

"You are the heir, you know, for I heard him tell you to keep his effects, save the letter."

"I shall turn all over to the colonel; but if I want proof of what has happened here that some of my foes may not say that I killed him, you'll be missing."

"If you get into trouble, I'll see to it that you do not suffer through act of mine."

"Where'll I find you?"

"Nowhere."

"I may be accused."

"I never thought of that before."

"If you are, do you see that tree?"

He pointed to a large live oak.

"I do."

"Send some friend whom you can wholly trust to that tree, and let him tack upon it a slip of paper, saying when he will be there, not sooner than a week after he leaves it there, and I will meet him and give proof that you are wholly innocent of Doctor Edgar Drayton's death."

"By Jove, I believe you, and I'll do it; but give him decent burial, pard."

"I will."

"Want me to help you, for I carries a pick, spade, and shovel along to fix ther trail when it needs it."

"No; I will bury him."

"Yer want ther pick and spade, then?"

"No, thank you; I am well provided."

"Well, pard, I says good-by to yer, and if you hain't a queer one, set me down for a liar."

"This world is made up of queer people, Nordeck, and there are stranger ones far than I am."

"Good-by."

He held out his hand, and Ned said:

"I'll take t'other one, pard, for that one just kilt him, and we was getting to be good friends."

Without a word the masked man extended his left hand, and, grasping it, Ned said:

"Well, good-by, though I hates to leave you so."

"Do not mind me, pard Nordeck."

Ned mounted to the box, took up his reins, gave a look at the dead body, another at the masked face of the Man in Black, and called out:

"Git along ag'in, critters!"

The team started up briskly, and the coach rolled on its way once more.

Several times Ned looked back, to see the masked man standing where he had left him.

Going over a ridge that hid him from sight, he then drew rein, put his brake down, tied the lines up tight, and, dismounting from his box, crept back up to the top of the hill.

Hiding in a clump of bushes, he peered back over the trail to see what the Masked Man in Black was doing.

He looked, wiped his eyes, and looked again.

He did not see any one.

The Man in Black had already disappeared.

Ned remembered that with his last backward glance as he went over the ridge, he had seen both the masked man and the body of Doctor Drayton lying at his feet.

The body was now gone.

"Well!

"That was quick work," he muttered.

Returning to the coach, he started again upon his way, driving fast.

About five miles from the spot where the fatal duel had taken place, he came to some timber land, the trees being large and scattering, and the trail good and very level.

Suddenly, ahead, he saw a man come out into the trail and halt, and he half drew rein, but at once held on as before, muttering to himself:

"I'm gittin' skeery, for its not a Cobra, but Buffalo Bill."

CHAPTER XI.

THE SCOUT INVESTIGATES.

The driver of the Taos coach felt like giving a yell of joy when he saw Buffalo Bill standing far ahead in the trail.

As has been said, he was one of the half score who knew that Buffalo Bill had not returned to the Northwest, and he had arranged with the scout to meet him if there was anything of importance to communicate.

The plan had been for Buffalo Bill to appear far ahead on the trail, catch the eye of the driver, and receive a signal if there was any one in the coach by whom he did not wish to be seen.

Then the scout was to go into hiding and Ned Nordeck was to pass him by, having dropped his whip, and, drawing rein, go back after it.

This same plan had been written to Lem Luby.

But now there was no signal to make, and the driver laid the whip upon his horses and drove up at a run to where the scout stood.

The team had evidently been along when road-agents had held up the coach, for upon seeing the scout they drew up suddenly without being reined in.

"Well, durn my pictur', ef they don't take you fer a outlaw ter hold us up," cried Ned, as he sprang from the box, for what he had to tell was too important to sit up there and make known.

"Well, Nordeck, all alone, I see."

"Yes, Chief Cody, I am now, but I had comp'ny until half a dozen miles back."

"Where are your passengers now?"

"Only had one, and he's dead."

"Ah! you have been held up?"

"I has and I hasn't, Mr. Cody."

"I don't just catch on?"

"I was held up, yes, and I were discreet enough not to kick ag'in' it."

"The Cobras are at work again, then?"

"This wasn't no Cobra, or, if so, he'd changed his rig, for he were dressed like a gent, and were a Masked Man in Black."

"He must have been a Cobra under false colors, if he was masked."

"He was under false colors if a Cobra, for he didn't rob me, and I've got rich freight along."

Buffalo Bill looked mystified, and Ned then went on to tell the whole story of his strange passenger, the halt by the Masked Man in Black, and the duel.

The scout listened with the deepest interest, and, after asking certain pertinent questions, said:

"And you have the man's effects with you?"

Ned got out the grip and revealed them.

"This is the most remarkable affair I ever heard of, Nordeck, and I cannot understand it just yet."

"You left the body there, you say?"

"You bet I left it there, sir, for if I hadn't, I'd been left there myself."

"I saw that, though the man was masked."

"And here I am on foot, miles from my camp, where both my horses are, but I shall go with all haste to the scene of the duel and see what I can discover before sunset."

"And I'll see you on my run back again, Mr. Cody?"

"Yes, for I would like to know what the colonel thinks of this strange affair."

"I'll tell you, sir."

"I came here to meet you to have you say to Colonel Kane that the grave on the river, which he knows about, I am watching closely, and though in the four days I have been on duty I have filled it up, it has been each time dug out, and I am, so far, utterly unable to catch the very clever one who does it."

"I'll tell him, sir."

"And do not speak of the grave to any one else."

"I will not, sir."

"Unless Lieutenant Willis happens to be with the colonel, for he knows about it also."

"I'll remember, sir."

"Do you wish me to bring you anything from the fort, sir?"

"Yes, here is a little list you can fill out at the sutler's."

"I will meet you either here or at the scene of the duel."

Ned Nordeck remounted his box and drove rapidly on, while Buffalo Bill, throwing his repeating rifle across his shoulder, started on the trail for the scene of the tragedy, his long, swinging stride carrying him rapidly over the ground.

As he neared the ridge where Ned had halted to look back, he made a wide flank movement, gained the timber, and approached the spot hidden by the undergrowth and some rocks.

He crept cautiously forward until he reached the trail, and was ready to cover any one with his revolver whom he might find there.

But the place was as silent as the grave—there was no one there.

Buffalo Bill saw at a glance that the masked man had taken the body with him when he left, concealed it, or buried it near.

There were tracks upon the ground of three different feet, of the driver's, his passenger and the Man in Black.

There was the imprint on the grass where the body had been lying, and a small red stain.

That was all the clew that Buffalo Bill had, save the story of Ned Nordeck.

It was growing dark, and again the scout threw his rifle upon his shoulder and strode away, saying, simply:

"To-morrow will tell."

CHAPTER XII.

BUFFALO BILL MAKES A DISCOVERY.

Back to his lonely camp went Buffalo Bill, and, finding his horses all right, he changed their feeding ground and turned in for the night as soon as he had eaten his supper.

He was more impressed than he cared to admit by this duel on the trail, and could not account for so strange a circumstance as a man in the prime of life, handsome, as Ned described him, a physician, and certainly not in poverty, had come all the way to New Mexico to allow his life to be taken by some mysterious person, who, dressed in broadcloth in the wilderness, masked his face, and held up a coach to demand his victim, but did not rob either Nordeck or the passenger.

Buffalo Bill had been devoting most of his time to the empty grave on the river, while in his secret camp.

Try as he might, he could not catch the one who untiringly kept it cleared of earth and logs, which he as untiringly placed there.

He laid traps, he lay awake all night, watched, planned, plotted, pretended to go away, yet did not, and never saw the unknown sexton who so carefully guarded the grave.

But the very moment he returned to his camp to look after his horses, he found that grave empty.

So it was that he decided to head Ned Nordeck off on the trail and ask him to send Dot Driver or Brazos Ben out to his aid, for he could leave him in camp while he watched, and he had his reasons for not moving his horses away from the encampment where he then was.

But when Buffalo Bill had heard from Ned Nordeck the story of the duel, for some reason he did not make the request for the scout to be sent out to join him.

When it was yet dark Buffalo Bill arose, had his breakfast, mounted his horse Pard and rode away.

He was on the same side of the river where the duel had been fought, and he rode on until he struck the stage trail.

Turning into it, he was not very long in reaching the scene of the duel.

Here he dismounted and spent all of an hour looking about him.

Then he sprang into his saddle and rode for the ford.

The river had a bar just there, made by a bend, where it was not over four feet deep, so the scout could cross by holding his feet upon his saddle.

Once across, the country was open for quite a distance, save the fringe of timber upon the river bank.

Hitching his horse in the timber, and hidden in a thicket from the view of any one passing along the trail, Buffalo Bill went on foot to the grave, half a mile up the river.

In going there before, cold as the water was, he was in the habit of packing his clothes and weapons, wrapped in his rubber blankets, upon two logs tied together, and swimming across, pushing his little raft ahead of him.

This gave him an unseen, unlooked for and noiseless approach to the bank, where he landed not twenty feet from the grave.

But for all this he had not been able to catch what he called the "Specter Sexton."

Now he walked boldly up the river bank, and he could well see the way ahead through the scattering timber.

He passed through the spot where Lieutenant Willis and his troopers had camped when returning from the battle with the Comanches, and soon after came in sight of the grave.

The moment his eyes fell upon it he came to a standstill.

His eyes were riveted upon it.

Instead of the open grave he saw that it had been filled.

He had done this the last time he was there, filling it completely, to make the "Sexton" take longer in digging it out.

But that was not all that riveted the eye of the scout, the fact that the grave was filled up.

Hastily he walked to the grave and stood beside it.

All about was as neatly done as though in reality it had been the work of a sexton.

The mound was not as he had left it, but perfect.

And more, there was a headboard.

It was a post of solid cedar, cut square, a foot in diameter, and rising above the grave some three feet.

Into this headboard was carved with great skill the following:

WITHIN THIS GRAVE
LIES ALL THAT IS MORTAL

OF

EDGAR DRAYTON, M. D.,
KILLED IN A DUEL NEAR THIS SPOT ON

APRIL 2D, 18-

BY THE HAND OF AN AVENGER.
"The mills of the Gods grind slowly,
But the grist is exceeding fine."

Buffalo Bill noted one strange circumstance, that the post had been cut for a long while, for it was time-stained, as was also all of the lettering except the date,

APRIL 2D, 18-

And that was freshly carved, the shavings cut out lying near as proof of this.

"Well, this is a discovery, indeed.

"This grave has at last found the occupant it was dug for. The avenger is avenged."

"I wonder if he has his eye on me now, for he has watched here much closer than I have?"

CHAPTER XIII.

THE COLONEL'S MESSENGER.

As Ned Nordeck's coach neared the scene of the duel, on its run back over the trail, there were two persons seen on the box, the driver and an officer in fatigue uniform.

The latter was the same officer who had peered over the cliff at night into the canyon where the outlaws had their secret camp, and who afterward had been held up on the trail by the one who had escaped, and in revenge for his brother's death had offered to betray the band.

"He is there, lieutenant," said Ned Nordeck, as the coach approached the spot where Doctor Drayton had fallen at the hands of the Masked Man in Black.

As the driver spoke they saw Buffalo Bill step out into the trail, and receiving the signal that all was right, he remained there awaiting their approach.

In a short while the coach drew up, and Lieutenant Willis sprang to the ground and, grasping the scout's hand, said, cordially:

"I'm glad to see you, Cody, and your self-imposed exile does not seem to disagree with you, for you are looking well."

"And am well, sir, and glad to see you, though the pleasure is unexpected."

"Nordeck has told you, of course, of the affair that occurred here?"

"Yes, and I come as Colonel Kane's especial messenger to make as thorough an investigation as is possible, with what news I have of the affair from Nordeck."

"I can give you more information, lieutenant."

"I expected that, Cody, for you are never idle upon a trail."

"As Nordeck turned the effects of this Doctor Drayton, and the letter to be sent also, over to the colonel, he wrote at once to the address, giving full particulars, as we had them, and the letters go by this coach east.

"Now what have you found out?"

"The empty grave has an occupant."

"At last!"

"Did you put him there?"

"Oh, no, sir; the avenger did."

"The man who put that warning up at the grave?"

"Yes, sir."

"He has killed some one, then?"

"Doctor Drayton is the one who rests in the grave, sir."

"Can it be possible?"

"There is my horse, sir, and I will mount and cross the river with you, so that you can go up to the grave."

"I will do so."

The lieutenant returned to his seat upon the box, and was soon after on the other

side of the river, Buffalo Bill following on horseback.

Arriving at the grave the lieutenant stood for some time reading the inscription upon the cedar post, and looking about him.

"Well, Cody, this is remarkable."

"It is a strange case, Lieutenant Willis."

"Do you feel sure that the body of Doctor Drayton is in the grave?"

"I am certain, sir."

"Still I think the grave should be opened."

"I have already opened it, sir."

"Ah!"

"And the body of Doctor Drayton is there?"

"Of course, I never saw him, but the body is that if a man such as Nordeck described. There is a bullet wound in the very center of the forehead, he is dressed in dark clothes, and I feel that there is not the slightest doubt but that the one in the grave is the passenger who came out on the coach and fought the duel with the masked man."

"And who is he?"

"That is to be found out, sir."

"But let me first tell you that the body I found in a cedar coffin."

"What?"

"Yes, sir; a well-made cedar coffin."

"You surprise me."

"What the masked man does he does well, sir, for the body was placed in it, with his clothing neatly arranged, his hands folded upon his breast, and the lid of the coffin was screwed down tight."

"I replaced all as I found it, and filled in the grave as before, so you see there is no doubt, sir, of the body being that of Doctor Drayton, the inscription on this cedar headboard also stating that fact."

"Yes, it must be so; but I was dubious on account of this grave having been kept open so long."

"My idea is, sir, that it has been dug for a long time, say for half a year or more, and was dug for the body now resting in it."

"It must be so, but now about this Masked Man in Black, as Nordeck calls him."

"He has thus far, Lieutenant Willis, been too clever and cunning for me."

"He has had it in his power to kill me time and again, when I never suspected his presence near me, but has refrained from doing so for some reason."

"The Death Charm you wear saved you, Bill," said Lieutenant Willis, with a smile.

"I am almost beginning to have faith in this same Death Charm, sir; but to the Masked Man in Black."

"Well?"

"You will see that all the lettering in that cedar headboard has been cut for some time, save the date, and here are the shavings that came from its having been carved out here at the grave."

"Now, that post is well made, and so is the coffin, and it took the best of tools to work with."

"The man that did it must have a habitation somewhere near here, and there did the work."

"As he never comes here on horseback, he leaves no trail, and save a track in the soft earth, I have nothing to trace him by."

"He has done his work, filled his mission, in killing Doctor Drayton, so he may leave here at once and forever."

"But that I will find out in time, for I have set my traps to betray the coming of any one here, and I shall not give up the search."

"Now, sir, is there any news at the fort?"

"None; but we all fear you are imposing an exile upon yourself there is no need of, as the outlaws are broken up."

"Time will tell, sir; but had I not been in my secret camp we would not have known what was done with Doctor Drayton's body."

"You go on to Herders' Ranch, I suppose?"

"Yes, to see if I can learn anything there."

"Try and see if you can hear anything of the outlaws, sir."

"I will," and, returning to the coach, the officer was soon on his way again.

CHAPTER XIV.

PANTHER PETE.

When the coach, after Buffalo Bill had gotten the supplies asked for, and said he would meet the lieutenant on his return trip, rolled on once more, Ned Nordeck driving briskly to make up for lost time, the driver heard from the officer what had become of the body of Doctor Drayton.

"Well, I declare, if that Masked Man in Black hain't a daisy."

"He kills his man, and buries him in style, coffin, headboard, and all."

"Lieutenant, yer should know that man, fer yer'd like him."

"I would like to know him, for he must be a very remarkable personage."

"He is all that, sir."

"You have never seen any one about the country here whom you could connect with the appearance of this masked man?"

"Not a soul, sir."

"Nor at Herders' Ranch?"

"No, sir; for except Taylor Travis and a few of the rich ranchers, there hain't anybody at the Ranch to fill the bill o' that man."

"Why, lieutenant, he is a gent, an' no mistake, and there is nothing of the tough or desperado about him."

"He had a debt ter pay, for some reason, an' t'other gent come ter settle up, and I guesses, as he didn't load his weapon, he know'd well who was ter blame."

"It is a total mystery, Nordeck."

"But do you know of any one who has a ranch or cabin on the trail, or near it, between Herders' Ranch and Taos?"

"I only knows of one, and he lives miles to the westward of here."

"Who is he?"

"They calls him Panther Pete, sir, and he is a pelt hunter."

"Yes, I have heard of him, but never seen him."

"He has been suspected of being an ally of the Comanches, as they never seemed to trouble him, and of El Cobras, as they also let him alone, and both redskins and outlaws must have often been by his camp."

"But nothing could be proved against him, and so he was never molested, and continues to trap and sell his pelts."

"Yes, sir; I gets his supplies now and then for him, as he don't care to go to Herders' Ranch."

"He meets me generally about a mile ahead of where we now are, gives me some money and a list of what he needs, and I bring them out on my run back."

"Every time he pays for the carrying, and will have it that I shall accept a present for my trouble, too, so there is nothin' mean about him."

"What kind of a looking man is he?"

"He's fairly tall, well built, as far as strength goes, but has a kind of hump on his back."

"He dresses in buckskin, and wears his shaggy hair long, and beard, too, not being handsome, as the word goes; at least, I wouldn't think so if I were a gal."

"How far is his cabin from the grave on the river?"

"I've never been to his cabin, sir, but I should say, from what he has told me, it must be a dozen miles, maybe more."

"Then he couldn't be your Man in Black?"

Ned laughed, and replied:

"No, indeed, sir; Panther Pete could never be a gent, and that the masked man was."

"Then, too, there is Panther Pete's hump, and his way of carrying himself was not like that gent's."

"Then we must look elsewhere for our Man in Black; but there is some one in the trail ahead."

"Is it another case of hold up?" and Lieutenant Willis got his weapons ready for use.

"It's Panther Pete, sir. Speak of ther devil, and his imps will appear," cried Ned.

Lieutenant Willis gazed with considerable interest upon the man they were approaching.

He stood in the trail, leaning upon his rifle.

His form would have been tall, but for the stoop in his broad shoulders and the slight hump upon his back.

He was dressed in buckskin, and had on his head a fox-skin cap, all of his own tanning.

His hair was long, iron-gray, and his beard was tucked into his buckskin hunting shirt.

At a glance the man's face was not prepossessing, yet there was strength in it, and he looked you straight in the eye while speaking.

"Pard, I wants a few things this run, so here is ther list and ther money."

"I'll be here on ye'r way back ter meet yer," he said, quietly.

"Say, my man, do you know of any dwellers in these wilds save yourself?" asked Lieutenant Willis.

"Injuns."

"I know; but any white men?"

"Ther outlaws prowl through here all ther time, but they is of dif'rent breeds."

"Have you seen any El Cobras lately?"

"Not fer a couple o' weeks."

"Guess they has had a skeer from that Northern scout bein' here."

"Who?"

"Buffalo Bill they calls him."

"He was after them, was he?"

"He came from Taos, and you is from there."

"How did you know he was on their trail?"

"He came to my cabin and got a horse while I were away from home, for he wanted it fer a leddy to ride, her horse havin' been kilt on ther prairie, and ther scout saved her from stampeded steers."

"She sent him, fer she knew whar' I lived, I hevin' seen her afore."

"Then he came ter tell me he tu'k ther horse, and I seen him then."

"Who was the lady?"

"I don't know her name; but I do know she found me hurt on the prairie one day, when my horse had fell and rolled over me, and she made me ride hers, and took me home, helped me all she could, and sent ther doctor from Herders' Ranch ter fix me up."

"And you do not know her name?"

"I don't."

"Or who she is?"

"I didn't say that."

"You do know?"

"Well, see here, I has heard ther Queen o' ther Gold Trail described, and she fits right in ter ther description, but, mind yer, officer, I doesn't say she is; but if she be, she were good ter me, and that's all I knows."

The story seemed a truthful one, the hunter appeared to hide nothing, and Lieutenant Willis felt convinced that he was neither connected with the Indians nor outlaws, but asked:

"Why is it the Comanches never trouble you, my man?"

"Because their head chief protects me."

"Why should he do that?"

"For the same reason the outlaws lets me alone—they has orders to do so."

"But are you the ally of the Comanches?"

"I keeps peace with 'em, but I has warned the settlement if they attempts a raid, when I knows it."

"Why are you not their foe?"

"I is their foe, officer, only they hain't mine."

"Why not?"

"I'll tell yer."

"Ther head chief tackled a panther one time, ther mate of it come, and but for me happenin' along, they'd hev' chawed ther life out of him."

"He were badly used up, and I toted him to my cabin and doctored him for a month, for I didn't see fit ter turn him over to ther fort, when he fell into my hands as he did."

"You were perfectly right; but now tell me if you know of any man in these parts living alone, as you do?"

"Nary one."

"You have seen no strangers about the country of late?"

"Only that scout, Buffalo Bill."

"Would you be likely to see one if he came to this part of the country?"

"Might, and mightn't."

"I goes about n' business, looking for no one, but ef I seed a strange trail I'd see whar' it went."

"Good-morning, officer," and Panther Pete shouldered his rifle and strode away.

"A strange character that, but an honest man, I feel certain, or signs fail," muttered Lieutenant Willis, as the stage continued on its way.

CHAPTER XV.

THE YOUNG RANCHERO.

There was quite a crowd gathered at Herders' Ranch to see the coach come in, and Broadaxe Jack, the "great man" of the settlement, received the lieutenant with courteous hospitality.

He had the looks and manners of a gentleman, in spite of his record as a man-killer, and he was so suave and quiet in his words and actions that no one would have suspected him of being such a terror if driven to it.

"Cody has gone back to the Northwest, so Ned tells me, lieutenant," he said, pleasantly.

"He left Taos a couple of days after his return from his raid on the stronghold of El Cobras," was the reply.

"Well, luck to him, wherever he goes, and he certainly left a record behind him here."

"No news of any more disturbances of the Cobras, Tobin?"

"None, sir."

"They had begun to think they were impregnable in their stronghold, until Buffalo Bill tracked them, and they disappeared most remarkably."

"Of course I know that some of the men in the Ranch are members of the band, but then we cannot put our fingers upon them—only wish we could."

"Heard nothing of their chief or the Queen of the Gold Trail?"

"Not a word, sir, and who they are, where from, and where gone, is a mystery."

"I only wish Cody had remained to track them down, for with them at large the Cobras are liable to break out again in some act of deviltry."

This was all said within the hearing of a score of men about the cabin, for Jack Tobin was one who was in the secret of Buffalo Bill's not having returned to the Northwest.

Just then a horseman rode up, and, dismounting, approached Lieutenant Willis.

He rode a black horse that was a splendid animal, and his bridle and saddle were worth a small fortune.

The rider was dressed in a pair of corduroy pants, stuck in handsome boots, a velvet jacket, slouch hat, and wore a white silk negligee shirt.

He was a handsome young fellow, and had a face daring and determined.

He was Taylor Travis, a young ranchero, who lived some fifteen miles away from Herders' Ranch.

He was said to be very rich, had the largest herds of cattle and of horses, and the best cabin in that part of the country, and, what was more, had it well furnished.

Taylor Travis was a popular man in Herders' Ranch, for he was ever generous, cordial in manner, and held himself aloof from no one.

He was not a dissipated man, but he drank in moderation, Jack Tobin ordering the very best of liquors and cigars for his use, and when he treated, which was a steady habit of his, he meant all should have the best.

His visits to Herders' Ranch were frequent, and whenever he came he gambled, playing for any sum his adversary cared to risk, for he was an inveterate gambler, and more frequently won than lost.

Such was the man who now came forward and greeted Lieutenant Willis, the two shaking hands cordially.

"Anything important, Lieutenant Willis, that brings you to the Ranch?" he asked, in a way that showed interest rather than curiosity.

"In one sense, yes, Mr. Travis.

"I wished to see how my four wounded men, left here in the care of Doctor Raleigh, were getting on, and to find out how long before they will be sufficiently recovered to take the coach for Taos."

"I have visited them, and they are getting along well."

"Yes, Lieutenant Willis, and Travis has sent them a number of what things could be gotten here to tempt their appetite," Jack Tobin said.

"I thank you for your kindness, Mr. Travis, but let me tell you what else brings me to the Ranch," and he told both Tobin and Taylor Travis the story of the remarkable duel on the trail.

It could be seen that both men were impressed, and they talked long and earnestly over it.

"The colonel wishes the matter kept quiet till news comes in reply to the letter he has written East, and it is best that the story of the duel does not get out; but he is anxious in some way to find the man that killed Doctor Drayton, so I must ask you both to see if you can place anybody here, or among the ranches, who would answer to the description Nordeck gives of this man in black."

Neither Taylor Travis nor Jack Tobin could think of any one whom the description would fit, but promised to try and see if they could find out such a person.

"I will be here until day after to-morrow, when the coach goes back to Taos, Mr. Travis, so if you hear of anything of interest in the matter, please let me know, and also of anything regarding El Cobras."

"I will, sir, with pleasure; but as regards the latter, though disbanded, I really expect some of the men will act upon their own responsibility, and we will hear of them holding up a coach or wagon-train or being guilty of some other deviltry soon, but then they will not be as dangerous as the organized band under Captain Cobra, and can be quickly run down."

"Yes, I have been expecting something of the kind, now that Buffalo Bill has left Fort Taos, for they stood in great awe of him."

"They had cause to," was the reply of the young ranchero, and he walked into the Broadaxe Saloon to gamble, as Jack Tobin showed Lieutenant Willis to his room.

CHAPTER XVI.

A FAIR FUGITIVE.

The more that Lieutenant Willis talked with the men about Herders' Ranch—those whose opinions were worthy of consideration—the more he was convinced that it was a wise move on the part of Buffalo Bill to go into hiding, so certain did all seem to feel that El Cobras would not be very long in showing themselves again.

The lieutenant found his four wounded soldiers much improved, and they expressed a wish to return with him to the fort, and he told them that if the doctor said they were able to stand the journey he would take them along.

Jack Tobin was a pleasant companion, but he had his duties to attend to, and as Taylor Travis, the young ranchero, had returned to his ranch during the night, and Lieutenant Willis found time hanging heavy upon his hands, he determined to get Broadaxe's best horse and accept the invitation he had received to ride out and see the handsome young cattle king.

His way led through miles of prairie land for nearly half a score of miles, and then he had a hilly and timbered country to cross, the ranches lying beyond this.

He had ridden briskly as far as the hills, and was going at a slow pace to give his horse a breathing spell, when he heard the rapid clatter of approaching hoofs.

He wondered who it could be that was riding at such a pace, when he heard, in the distance, a man's voice, shouting:

"Use your rifle, and bring her horse down!"

"If you harm her I will kill you!"

These words put Lieutenant Willis at once upon his guard, and upon his mettle as well.

He had brought his repeating rifle along for any game he might run across, and he quickly unslung it, reined his horse back behind a boulder, and just then a horse bearing a rider dashed into view.

The horse was urged to full speed by the whip of the rider, and was coming straight toward the lieutenant.

The rider, a glance revealed, was a young girl.

The officer was upon a ridge, over which his trail ran, turning abruptly at the bottom of the hill to the right and to the left, up and down a small valley.

The fugitive was coming down the valley, and was turning up the hill, when a shot came from the direction in which the voice had been heard.

The horse gave a bound, staggered, strained on up the hill, and, as he was falling, the rider caught up her skirt, leaped free of her saddle, and alighted safely upon her feet, turning at bay with a revolver in her hand.

She was within fifty feet of the officer and presented a beautiful and thrilling picture as she stood, a young girl at bay.

She was clad in a close-fitting riding-habit of dark blue, wore a black slouch hat and plume, gauntlet gloves, and McKenny Willis, as he beheld her, mentally vowed that he had never seen woman half so beautiful before.

Her hair was of gold bronze hue, and hung in two braids down to her knees.

Her face, still flushed by her rapid ride, was beautiful, and her attitude was that of one who knew how to use the revolver in her hand, and dared do it, too.

Not a moment did Lieutenant Willis allow her to remain in ignorance of help at hand, for he called out:

"Keep your stand, miss, for aid is near."

She uttered a startled cry, turned quickly, saw the blue uniform, and said in a low but earnest tone:

"Oh, thank you."

"But there are four of them."

McKenny Willis did not care just then if there were a dozen, and he answered back:

"All right, miss."

Just then a horseman dashed into sight around the clump of timber on the hillside and yelled out:

"I killed her horse, and here she is."

A whoop came up from the valley, while Lieutenant Willis muttered:

"Yes, and here I am."

In another moment the man dashed up and threw himself from his horse, halting some twenty feet away from the girl, who still maintained her defiant attitude.

The man was a rough-looking fellow, bearded, long-haired, and armed.

"I say, gal, put up that weepin, or I'll lariat yer," and the man turned to take his lariat from his saddle-bow.

"Lay your hand upon that lasso, and I'll send a bullet through your heart!" came the quick rejoinder of the girl.

"Oh, I knows yer kin shoot fer dead center, so I'll wait for t'others."

As the man spoke, two other horsemen dashed into sight, and came up the hill, one shouting:

"Yer has sure got her, Hook."

"I hain't so sart'in, pard, fer she's a shooter, and look thar!" and the man called Hook pointed to the defiant attitude of the young girl.

"Lordy! she do show fight," and the two men had now mounted and joined their comrade, the three standing twenty feet away from their prey, and with an undecided look upon their faces.

Then Hook whispered to one of the men, who held a lasso in his hand, and, springing behind his horse for protection, he threw the coil with force and skill.

But as the noose left his hand there came a shot, and though the coil settled over the head of the girl at bay, the one that threw it fell dead ere it reached her.

CHAPTER XVII.

DYING WITH SEALED LIPS.

The shot and its fatal result startled the two men, who at first thought the girl had fired upon them.

But quickly following the shot there

came bounding out from behind the boulder Lieutenant Willis, revolver in hand.

He seemed not satisfied with dropping one of the men, and wishing to put the other two to flight, for he shouted in the sharp tones his men knew so well:

"Hands up, both of you!"

But the response was two shots, followed by a third and a fourth, all fired almost together.

Down went the officer's horse, but even as he fell Willis fired and another of the outlaws fell, while the third, bounding upon the back of his pony, was off like an arrow, unhurt by the rapid shots sent after him by the young girl, for Lieutenant Willis had fallen heavily.

But he was quickly on his feet, and grasped the second outlaw as he was striving to escape.

The moment the man turned, Lieutenant Willis saw that he was wounded, his shot having entered his breast.

"Come, my man, resistance is useless," he said, sternly.

"I guesses I knows it, and I won't hang."

"That will be decided later."

"I says no, fer don't you see I has got it where I live, that yer shots has done fer me," and the man dropped down and leaned his back against the dead horse of the young girl.

"Yes, you are hard hit, I believe."

"Let me see if I can help you," said the officer, kindly.

"Doctor me up ter hang, yer means; but it hain't no use. I'm almost dead."

"I am sorry for you, but you sought to harm this lady, and you must take the consequences."

The girl had stood apart until then, uttering no word.

But now she advanced and said:

"It was not your work, for you had a master, and did what you did for gold."

"Who is that master?"

The man looked at her, but made no reply.

"I feel very very sorry for you, my poor fellow, for I do not believe you intended me harm, other than in capturing me at the command of another."

"Who was he?"

"I cannot tell, miss."

"You mean that you will not."

"I will not tell, miss."

"You did not act for yourself, then?"

"No, miss."

"And that man lying there, and the one who escaped?"

"Were the same as me, miss."

"Your leader was with you not ten minutes ago, for I heard his voice."

The man was silent.

"Speak, my man, and as you feel you must die, confess to this lady the crime you entered into against her," said Lieutenant Willis.

"I'm going to die, but I won't tell."

"Would you die with such a sin on your conscience?"

"If I confessed I would break my oath, die with a greater sin upon my conscience—no, I will not tell."

The man had dropped his dialect, and he seemed to suffer more and more, while his face had already taken on the hue of death.

He was a young man, but sin and dissipation had branded his face irrevocably.

At last he said, faintly:

"This is a sad scene for you, miss; go, and leave me to die alone, and have this officer escort you, for other dangers may threaten."

"I will not go. I would not be a true woman to leave you now, even though you did seek to harm me."

"You were good once, you had a mother, sisters, perhaps, and as none are near to say one word to you in your dying moments, I will not desert you."

"Come, let us see if we cannot make him more comfortable, sir," and she turned to Lieutenant Willis, looking up into his face as she dropped upon her knees by the side of the dying man.

"God bless you," murmured the man, and mentally Lieutenant Willis repeated:

"God bless her!"

"No, let me rest as I am, sir," said the dying man, as Lieutenant Willis would have moved him, and he half raised his hand as though he would, had he dared, have touched that of the girl.

She saw his act, and at once grasped his hand, saying softly:

"I feel, too, that you must die, that perhaps it is a question of a few minutes—can I do anything for you, have you any last request to leave?"

The man said nothing.

"Yes, my poor fellow, you may have a word to send to some one, a wish, and I will be most glad to write to any one for you, or do anything in my power."

"And these kind words from the lips of the one I would have wronged, from the man whose shot sends me to my grave."

Lieutenant Willis winced at the words, but answered:

"With this lady I feel no unkindness toward you now."

"What I did, I deemed my duty."

"It was your duty, and I am justly punished."

"You were plucky to attack three of us—the fourth ran off—he would not be seen."

"Who was it?"

"I will not tell, sir, for he served me well, once; but I thank you, miss, I thank you, sir, but I have no confession to make, no message to send to any one."

"I am a black sheep, and will cause no more pain to those whom I leave—let me die, and my fate remain unknown; yes, put 'Unknown' upon my grave—that is all."

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE "UNKNOWN" AT REST.

Quietly, with the young girl clasping his hand, the young reprobate sank into the sleep of death, once, before the breath faded away, opening his eyes and fastening them upon the beautiful face bending over him, and, while a smile came hovering about his lips, he muttered:

"It was just like you, mother, to forgive me—I am happy now."

His mind had wandered back into the past, and his blinding eyes had seen in the face of the girl that of his mother.

McKenny Willis had risen, and stood with arms folded, gazing not upon the dying man, but away off over the prairie through a vista in the trees.

It was a bitter moment for him, though he could not reproach himself for having done his duty.

Had the man died differently, he would have accepted it as a soldier's lot to send him out of life.

But to pass away as he did, dying from the wound his hand had dealt, with the girl whom he had sought to kidnap bending over him in forgiveness, and clasping his hand in sympathy, uttering no word against the man who had wrecked him, the one who had sent him to his death through doing an evil deed, refusing his name to allow those who loved him to know how he died, and wishing only the word "Unknown" put upon the headboard that marked his grave; all in all it was a scene that made a deep impression upon the young officer, one he could never forget.

It was a sad picture he gazed upon when he looked again, and, kneeling, he laid his finger upon the pulse, and said:

"He is dead."

Then he took the form and drew it into the thicket, folded the hands across the breast, and taking a blanket from the fallen pony of the dead youth, spread it over the two bodies, lying side by side.

To catch the other two ponies was the work of a few minutes, and to transfer his own and the young girl's saddle and bridle to their back was his next move.

The girl had stood silently watching him, and when he approached her leading the two horses she stepped forward with extended hand, and said:

"Now let me thank you, sir, for all that you did for me, though words seem cold. Indeed, to show gratitude to one who

risked his life for me, who took upon his conscience the lives of two men."

"I feel more than I can tell you how deeply grateful I am."

The tears stood in her beautiful eyes, and her voice, low and musical, quivered with emotion.

"Pray do not thank a man for doing what only a dastard would refuse to do, and you know killing is a soldier's trade."

He spoke in a light vein, but she noted a tinge of bitterness in his tone, and replied:

"Wanton killing is murder, sir, but to take life in a good cause has won honor and rank from the beginning of time; but let us at least know each other by name—I am Rose Reeves, of Evergreen Ranch, some six miles from here," and she again extended her hand.

"And I am McKenny Willis, first lieutenant commanding Troop A, —th Cavalry stationed at Fort Taos."

"Ah, indeed! Your gallant conduct in my defense simply verifies all that I have heard of you, for I know you, sir, as the commander in the two battles with the Comanches of late, and thus the one who prevented our settlement and ranches to be visited by death and destruction—yes, Mr. Travis has told me much of you, and my father was one of the ranchers who served under you in the fight near Herders' Ranch."

"Yes, I recall your father, Miss Reeves, and I know Mr. Travis, but they have said more of me than I deserved, for I was but an humble instrument as commander, while the hero of both battles, the one whose advice I followed, was the great scout, William F. Cody, better known as Buffalo Bill."

"Yes, I have heard much of him, since I was a little girl, but his pluck and cleverness do not take all credit from you."

"Will you go to Evergreen Ranch with me, Lieutenant Willis, and meet my parents, accepting our hospitality?"

"Thank you, I will escort you home with pleasure, and ask your father to send after and bury these bodies, but I was on my way to visit Mr. Taylor Travis."

"He lives miles to the north of us. His ranch being the one nearest the Indian danger line, you should have taken the third trail to the left this way from Herders' Ranch, to go there, though you can return that way from Evergreen."

"He bowed and aided her to mount, and in another moment they were going rapidly along on their way to Evergreen Ranch.

The young girl set the pace, and in less than an hour they passed into the gate that led to a park-like enclosure, in which stood a large and massive built cabin of logs, surrounded by a broad piazza, and with a flat roof, with breastworks above for defense.

Upon the piazza sat a gentleman of fifty and a lady, both of them appearing little like the general ranchers about them.

The gentleman Lieutenant Willis remembered to have seen at the Indian battle near Herders' Ranch, he having come to the fight at the head of a score of cowboys, and had been introduced by Taylor Travis, who commanded another band of cattle men.

"Why, Lieutenant Willis, this is indeed a pleasure most unexpected, and I am most happy to welcome you to Evergreen Ranch—my wife, Lieutenant Willis, and let me say we all know you here, and bless you for what you did for us."

Such was McKenny Willis' welcome at Evergreen Ranch, and when the ranchero and his wife had heard the cause of his escorting Rose home, then indeed they were more earnest in their greeting.

"You will stay to dinner, at least, and I'll send men at once to the scene for those bodies," said Ranchero Reeves, and this the officer consented to do, and he greatly enjoyed the feast of good things placed before him.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE ROSE OF EVERGREEN RANCH.

McKenny Willis had heard of the Rose of Evergreen, and that the Reeves were

people above their neighbors in social position and wealth, though they never looked down upon the humblest cowboy upon their ranch.

Ranchero Reeves had been one of the first settlers in that part of the country, and had had many ups and downs with being burnt out by the Comanches and robbed by outlaws, but he had prospered in spite of all setbacks, and was the richest man in these parts, save Taylor Travis.

Rose had been reared from early girlhood in the saddle, could shoot revolver and rifle unerringly, also a bow and arrow, and could lasso a mustang at full speed.

Her mother had taught her at home, as also had her father, who was a scholar, in all her studies, until her sixteenth year, when she had been sent to a fashionable boarding-school in New Orleans for one year, and New York for another, to complete her education.

She had returned to the ranch six months before, a finished young lady, accomplished in music and painting, and more beautiful than ever, but had at once dashed heart and soul into the old-time wild life of the prairies again.

The cowboys had named her the Rose of Evergreen, and a dozen young cattlemen at once became her devoted slaves, until it was said by all, Taylor Travis is the favored one, though Rose Reeves had never seemed to show partiality to any one.

Thus matters stood when she had been rescued by McKenny Willis when out for her morning gallop, which often extended a dozen miles.

Mr. Reeves had regarded the attempted kidnapping of his daughter as the work of some of the El Cobra band, attempting to capture and hold her for a large ransom.

She told how she had been riding slowly along, when two lassoes were thrown to ensnare her.

Fortunately she had eluded both, and started in flight, when, looking back, she saw four men following in hot pursuit, one of them dressed in deep black, with face wholly masked.

That was the man whom Lieutenant Willis had heard give the order to shoot her horse, and he had done so.

And that same Man in Black had not appeared on the scene with the three whom Rose had faced when she stood at bay.

Who he was was a mystery to Mr. Reeves, and if Rose had any suspicion she held her peace.

As for Lieutenant Willis, he said nothing, but he could not but recall the Masked Man in Black, the duelist who had killed Doctor Drayton.

There was something about Rose, in her words at the scene of the tragedy, her replies to her father's questioning, which caused McKenny Willis to say to himself:

"I verily believe that she knows more than she will tell about this affair, that she is aware of who the masked man really is."

The bodies were brought in from the ridge, and while one of them was to be buried with others killed in battling off raiders from the ranch, the youth who had died unknown, and refusing to confess who the real kidnapper was, was to find a resting-place down by the brook beneath a spreading oak tree, a picturesque and romantic spot, where Rose often loved to go and read.

She would have it so, and her father yielded to her, so the body was borne there by six cowboys, who recognized him as a young man who worked on a ranch a number of miles away, along with the man who had been killed with him.

The cowboys could not understand the partiality shown, but both Rose and Lieutenant Willis did, and Mr. and Mrs. Reeves understood it when they heard how he had died, and in a low, plaintive voice the young girl read the service of the dead over the remains of the Unknown.

It was late in the afternoon when Lieutenant Willis mounted the horse of the young kidnapper, and a fine animal it was, and departed on the trail leading to

Oak Park Ranch, the home of Taylor Travis.

He had declined the hospitable urging of Mr. Reeves, his wife and daughter to remain, saying that he would visit Mr. Travis as he had intended to do, and must be back that night in Herders' Ranch, to catch the coach for Taos early the next morning.

It was a ten-mile ride to Oak Park Ranch, but Lieutenant Willis kept his horse in a steady canter all the way, and came in sight of the young ranchero's home just as the sun was nearing the horizon.

If he had admired the ranch of Mr. Reeves, that of the young ranchero was one to command greater admiration, and the officer was surprised to find it well furnished, a piano there, as at Evergreen, and every indication of solid comfort.

The ranchero met him as he dismounted, gave him a most cordial greeting, and when he had heard the story of his rescue of the Rose of Evergreen, he said, with frankness and earnestness:

"Lieutenant Willis, what would I not give to have done what you have—saved that noble girl from harm?"

"But you mystify me about this Masked Man in Black, and I shall do all in my power to find him out for you."

After supper, and a couple of hours spent at the ranch, Lieutenant Willis mounted his horse and started for the settlement, Taylor Travis saying that he would accompany him a few miles to put him upon the right trail.

CHAPTER XX.

THE MEETING IN THE DARK.

Lieutenant Willis parted with Taylor Travis some five miles from the latter's ranch, and there was no doubt in the officer's mind but that the ranchero was desperately in love with the Rose of Evergreen.

"He gave me fair notice that he was deeply interested in her, and hinted that she had given him strong reason to hope that his regard for her was reciprocated, and that dashes my prospects to the ground, for if ever a man fell in love at first sight, I have done so, and it would not be becoming in an officer and a gentleman to press his suit when forewarned that another stands in the way."

"Ah, me! I fear I have escaped a hundred times, to be trapped by a prairie girl, and—"

He halted his reverie quickly, for he saw a horseman coming toward him.

Of course he was likely to meet some one, and it was to be expected, riding as he was, along a settlement trail.

But he knew that Travis' ranch was out of the beaten way, and that any one traveling that trail must be going there.

It was ten o'clock at night, clear starlight, and bright enough to see the well-marked trail before him, and that a horseman had come over a rise a hundred yards distant, and was advancing toward him.

He was yet ten miles from Herders' Ranch, and the nearest habitation to him that he was aware of was Taylor Travis' ranch.

He did not draw rein at sight of the horseman, nor did the latter appear to do so when seeing him.

But McKenny Willis prepared to meet friend or foe.

He got his revolver out, and held it in one hand, ready for quick use.

Nearer and nearer the man approached, and as the horse came along at a walk, the form of the rider swayed from side to side.

"He is either asleep or drunk," muttered the officer, and just then the stranger's horse halted just before him.

"Ho, pard, which way?" called out the officer.

There was no reply.

"Come, my man, wake up, for it is dangerous to sleep on a trail these times."

Still no reply.

"Hello! hello! Whoop!" shouted Lieutenant Willis.

It made no impression upon the rider, and the horse stood with lowered head as though also asleep, or very tired.

Finding that the man made no reply,

Lieutenant Willis rode forward, and, laying his hand upon his shoulder, said sternly:

"Come, my man; wake up!"

The form swayed toward him as he grasped it, and then, for the first time, a thought flashed through the brain of the officer as he beheld something he had not seen before.

Placing his hand upon the face of the horseman, Lieutenant Willis cried:

"My God! he is dead, and bound in his saddle!"

It was a shock to the soldier, strong as his nerves were, that he had been trying to awaken the dead.

He leaned forward and placed his hand over the heart.

It was still.

The pulse gave back no throb to his touch.

He saw that the man was not only bound in his saddle, but arranged there with great care to make him ride upright.

Two sticks had been cut, and one end placed in straps on each side of the saddle, and bound around his body with a lasso to hold his form erect, while the hands had been tied to the horn, the feet to the girth.

Holding up the head, the lieutenant looked into it by the starlight.

But this did not satisfy him, so he took from his pocket a silver match-case.

Striking a match he took from it, he held the flame up to the man's face and regarded the countenance by its light.

"I do not think I can be mistaken, though I got but a hasty glance of him this morning. Yes, I am pretty certain that it is the man who escaped, one of the trio who attacked Miss Reeves."

"His retribution has been swift, but who was his slayer?"

"Who was it that has tied him thus in his saddle, and turned his horse loose?"

Unable to answer this question, Lieutenant Willis pondered a minute as to what he should do.

Should he turn the horse loose again and allow him to go on his way to some ranch, to be found and cared for by others, perhaps going to the ranch of Taylor Travis, as he was on the direct trail, or should he lead the animal and his ghastly rider on to Herders' Ranch with him.

After deliberation, he decided upon the latter course.

So he took the reins and started once more upon his way, going at a slower pace than before, as he had the horse in lead.

He had gone several miles when he came to a ridge of timber, the same which he had crossed in the morning at a point miles further down, and at the very moment when he could be of such valuable service to the Rose of Evergreen.

He was just entering the timber, when loud came the words:

"Lieutenant Willis, by the gods of war!"

CHAPTER XXI.

BUFFALO BILL'S STORY.

"Buffalo Bill's voice among a thousand!"

This was the answer of Lieutenant Willis, given after hearing his name called from the darkness of the timber he was entering.

"You are right, Lieutenant, and glad am I to meet you."

With these words the tall form of Buffalo Bill stepped out of the thicket into the starlight.

"And how is it I find you here, Bill?" asked the officer, after grasping the scout's hand.

"I was just going to ask you that question, sir, especially as you have my dead man with you."

"Your dead man?"

"Yes, sir, I may so call him."

"You killed him, then?"

"No, sir, I did not, but I claimed him, as I found him."

"Found him?"

"I'll tell you how it was, sir, as soon as I have gotten my horse, which is a hundred yards away, for I will ride along with you a mile to a trail by which I go back to my stamping ground."

"I am interested, Cody, so get your

horse and come along, for what you are doing here I cannot imagine."

Buffalo Bill walked back into the timber, but soon returned, mounted upon Pard.

Wheeling alongside of the lieutenant, Buffalo Bill said:

"No, sir, I did not kill the man, but he told me who did."

"I think I know him, Bill."

"Indeed, sir."

"From his own account, he was not a creditable acquaintance."

"No; but you talked with him, then?"

"He did the talking—the little that he could do."

"I was coming along a trail when I discovered him."

"His horse was in a walk, and he was reeling in the saddle, holding hard to the horn."

"I supposed he had been imbibing tanglefoot in Herders' Ranch."

"Suddenly, when some distance from me, he fell from the saddle and his horse began to crop grass near."

"It was daylight, then?"

"Yes, sir; half an hour before sunset."

"Well?"

"I rode up to him, and then saw that he was wounded."

"He was moaning pitifully, and had no fewer than three wounds in his back, one a scalp wound, that was slight, another bullet having entered under his right shoulder, and a third was in his neck."

"He had bled a great deal, but had bound the wounds up as best he could."

"I saw by his face that he was a tough citizen, but of course wished to do all that I could for him, and did."

"A stream ran near, and I bathed his wounds, but I knew that the one under the shoulder blade was fatal, that it was but a question of a short time."

"The one in the neck, too, had cut through his mouth, and was a bad one."

"I told him frankly that time was up with him, and asked if I could do anything for him."

"He groaned bitterly at this, and asked who I was."

"I told him, and he seemed startled, for he said:

"If I get over this you will hang me."

"Then I told him I was not in the hanging business, and again asked what I could do for him, when he said, eagerly:

"You are sure I will die?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"Within an hour or two."

"When I do, tie me on my horse, turn his head in yonder direction, and start him home."

"Where do you live?"

"Never mind."

"What is your name?"

"It does not matter."

"Who wounded you?"

"He was silent, and I repeated:

"Who gave you your wounds?"

"A girl."

"Ah, I feared it," muttered Lieutenant Willis, and Buffalo Bill seemed surprised at his words, but continued:

"His answer, as I said, was that a girl had given him the wounds."

"A girl," I asked.

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I attempted to kidnap her."

"When?"

"This morning."

"Why did you do so?"

"I had orders."

"From whom?"

The lieutenant drew a long breath.

Was he now going to learn the truth which the young kidnapper had died refusing to confess?

Was he going to learn the name of the leader of the kidnappers, and which he half believed that Rose Reeves knew?

"Go on, Bill, I am much interested," he said, calmly.

"When I asked him who had given him orders to kidnap a young girl, he did not reply for a while, and then said:

"I won't tell, for I took my chances with the others, and they were wiped out."

"If I had been successful, my pay

would have been big, and I won't betray him now."

"There were others with you, then?"

"Yes; our leader and two pards of mine."

"The captain escaped, my pards were killed, and I am going on the same trail, but I won't betray him."

"I urged, but he refused, and only said that the girl was the daughter of a rich ranchero, and known as the Rose of Evergreen."

"That they had her at their mercy, when some one came to her rescue, a man in uniform, and he had to fly for his life, as the rescuer killed his pards."

"As he rode away, the girl, who was a dead shot, fired at him, three of the bullets striking him, and the others passing near."

"He had ridden hard, then halted to dress his wounds, and roamed about waiting for night, when he could go to his home, but grow so weak he fell from his saddle."

"That was all I could get from him, and soon after he grew too weak to say more."

"As he had urged me to tie him to his saddle and let his horse take him home, I decided to do so, and when he died I cut some sticks and bound him to his horse as you no doubt have discovered."

"Turning the animal loose, he took the trail in this direction, and shortly after I followed, for I came down this way upon a trail I am anxious to see the end of."

Such was Buffalo Bill's story, and, having heard it, Lieutenant Willis made up his mind as to his plan of action.

CHAPTER XXII.

A DEAD SECRET.

For some minutes after the scout had finished speaking not a word was spoken between the two, both seeming busy with their own thoughts.

The lieutenant was the first to break the silence, and he said:

"I have a story to tell you, Cody."

"Well, sir, you will find me a ready listener."

"I wish to tell you what I know, and, putting it with yours, of what the kidnapper told you, we will find no difficulty in making it complete."

Then Lieutenant Willis told his story of starting over to see Taylor Travis, to put in the day he would have to wait in Herders' Ranch, and the scene he became an actor in.

"Then, sir, the young lady did really kill the man?"

"Yes, and it is a pity, for her sake."

"So I think, Lieutenant Willis."

"I have heard of her, for the scouts have seen her and say she is very beautiful, and everybody loves her."

"She is a dandy rider and shot, too, they said, and has a piano which her father brought out in a spring wagon for her, while she sings like a bird."

"Of course, I took it all in as a case of clear gone on the boys' part, as I did not expect to find such an accomplished and lovely personage out in these wilds save in a fort."

"They have not overpraised her, Bill, for she is all they told you, and more; but I believe she is mortgaged property to that dashing young ranchero, who will make her a good husband."

"I don't believe it, lieutenant, for, handsome as he is, educated and rich, he takes too much pleasure in low company, and a man such as he should ascend, not go downward."

"You do not like him, Bill."

"Oh, I think he's brave, for I've seen him tried; in fact, he has killed several men about Herders' Ranch in a very plucky stand-up-to-it way, I have been told; but I don't trust him, sir."

"You are a good reader of human nature, I know, but I see nothing in Travis other than a handsome, generous-hearted fellow, a trifle wild, perhaps, and a gambler, while I know that he has seen several personal encounters that were forced upon him, and also gambles a great deal."

"Well, sir, I may be wrong, but I have no faith in him, and would dislike any lady I was interested in to care much

for him; but now, sir, what about this Rose of Evergreen killing the outlaw?"

"That is just what I wished to speak to you about, Bill."

"I hope she will not have to know it, sir."

"That is just the point, for I am sure it would hurt her deeply."

"Nobody knows that she killed him?"

"Except you and me."

"We need not tell."

"That is what I think, Cody."

"You can take the man on with you into Herders' Ranch and say that you found him dead on the trail."

"As I did."

"It will be simply put down as somebody having killed and robbed him, and he will not be connected with the man who escaped from the attack upon Miss Reeves."

"Bill, that is the way we will have it."

"Of course, I will report it as it was to Colonel Kane, so that he will know the truth if it has to come out some day; but I told you of her sympathy with that dying youth, and if she knew that she had killed this man she would be deeply pained."

"She shot to kill, sir, for three of her shots hit him, and the others did not miss very far, but that was under the influence of the moment, and now she would, as you say, sorrow over having taken the life of even such a man, and one who attempted to harm her."

"I know how it is myself, when I have been forced to pull trigger on a human being."

"You are right, Bill, and having taken a human life it is too great a burden to shoulder upon a young girl, where it can be avoided, and so we'll keep silent upon the subject."

"Yes, sir, it shall be as a dead secret."

"That is just it."

"You know, sir, that I am supposed to be in the Northwest, so I could not be known in the matter."

"Very true."

"It was on this account I did not carry the body to the Ranch, for I did not wish to be known."

"I had no means with me for burying it, save with my knife as a spade, and that is slow work when one is in a hurry, so I put the man on his horse as you saw, hoping the animal would take him where he lived."

"Would that not be the best way of getting at the fact of who the man really is, by tracking him to his home?"

"I have thought of that, sir, but then it would simply let the young lady know that she had killed the man."

"True."

"And as he is dead, it would serve no cause that would amount to anything."

"No, sir; you had better take him on with you to the Ranch, and the sooner he is in his grave the better."

"You are right, and the cause of his death, as you said, remains a dead secret; but now, Bill, tell me what it is that brought you here, when I thought you were forty miles west of here?"

"I will tell you, sir, the trail that I am on," replied Buffalo Bill.

CHAPTER XXIII.

STILL IN HIDING.

"I'll tell you, sir, just why I am here," continued Buffalo Bill.

"I am following a trail."

"What kind of a trail?"

"I am anxious to find that out, sir, for I went again to the grave on the river early this morning, and I saw that it had been visited by some one since I was last there."

"The Man in Black again, doubtless."

"Yes, sir; so I believed."

"You know that I placed things so about the grave that I could tell if any one went there again."

"Yes."

"I arranged for any one who went on foot."

"I remember."

"But this time the visitor was on horse-

back, and I, of course, had not difficulty in placing him."

"Well, Bill, you tracked him, of course?"

"I am still tracking him, sir."

"The man was there not very long before I was, and he rode a large horse, iron shod, not a pony."

"I followed the trail for a mile on foot, saw that it came in this direction, so I returned to my camp and, giving one of my horses a long rope that would give him grass enough for a couple of days, and a chance to reach the brook for water, I mounted Pard here and returned to the trail."

"I followed it without difficulty except at certain places, and it led me right toward the ranch country here."

"About three o'clock this afternoon I suddenly came upon this, evidently dropped upon the trail."

Buffalo Bill handed something to the lieutenant, who quickly said:

"It is a mask."

"Yes, sir, a black one, just the kind Ned Nordeck described as being worn by the Man in Black."

"This grows interesting, Bill."

"All along I had the idea that I must be on the trail of the Masked Man in Black, as I did not know who else knew of the grave or would visit it."

"Then, too, the visitor had shaped up the mound a little better than I did, and straightened the post, so that naturally led me to the belief that it could be no other than the Masked Man in Black."

"It would look so, as who else would take such an interest in it?"

"No one, sir."

"The finding of the mask, which had been dropped, for one of the strings had been broken, put the idea into my mind that the slayer of Doctor Drayton was some rancher."

"Some one who had a home here among the ranches, but while waiting for the coming of the man he was to fight a duel with, had camped up near the grave he had dug for him."

"It would seem so."

"His secret camp I could not find, for he went to and from it afoot."

"After the duel he doubtless returned to his ranch, mounted his horse, and rode back to see if the grave was all right, knowing that I had been tampering with it for so long a time."

"He had come along the stage trail, and from the direction of Herders' Camp, that the tracks plainly showed, but he came back the way I have followed him."

"And have you tracked him anywhere yet?"

"No, sir; I was still trailing him when I saw the kidnapper coming, and that delayed me until after nightfall."

"Now, my plan is to return to the hills where I met the kidnapper, and camp for the rest of the night, and ask you to delay your return to the fort to-morrow, writing the colonel by Ned Nordeck your reason, and for you to ride out here to-morrow afternoon and meet me."

"I will do so, Bill."

"You see, sir, I do not wish to be seen by any one, and as I am I would be recognized."

"You certainly would."

"So please bring me a disguise of some kind; Jack Tobin can fit me up with one, and I will follow that trail where it leads."

"Of course, nothing can be done to the Man in Black, whoever he may turn out to be, for it was a squarely fought duel, as far as he knew; but the colonel wishes to find out who he is, you told me, and we can make the try."

"We will, Bill."

"Then, too, he may prove to be none other than Captain Cobra, and Captain Cobra may be discovered to be a ranciero."

"You do certainly get at a matter from every side, Bill."

"Have to, sir, to get there."

"But there is one thing more I wish to ask you to do for me."

"Certainly."

"The Masked Man in Black was called Tyler Tatmal by the man he killed."

"That was the name."

"Please find out from Tobin if there is such a rancher or settler about Herders' Ranch, or if he ever delivered a letter through the post office to one of that name."

"A good idea, Bill, and I will do so."

"Then, sir, I will leave you now, but let me first take the props away from this dead man, and tie him differently upon the saddle, for it would not be supposed that you would rig him up this way."

This was done, and with his weird companion, Lieutenant Willis started on for Herders' Ranch, while Buffalo Bill returned to the hills, to go into camp for the balance of the night.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE MEETING IN THE TIMBER.

It was one o'clock before Lieutenant Willis reached Herders' Ranch, and he rode into the stable of the Sleepwell tavern unseen by any one.

Sending a man in for Jack Tobin, he told him of the day's adventures, meeting Cody, and what he had decided to do to help the scout on his trail, but he did not tell him that the man had fallen under the deadly aim of the Rose of Evergreen.

"Your horse was killed under me, Tobin, and I brought this one, that fell to me as one that belonged to the kidnappers, and will pay you what difference you deem just."

"Why, lieutenant, a fair exchange is no robbery, and this is about as good a horse as the one you rode away, though that is saying a great deal, as horseflesh goes, but bless her sweet soul, I would lose any horse I own to have saved that sweet girl, the Rose of Evergreen; so we are even."

The two now entered Jack Tobin's private rooms, the body of the kidnapper being left in the stable until daylight, and the landlord continued:

"Now to disguise Cody, for he is not easily disguised."

"No, but we can fit him up in some way."

"Yes, I can rig him out in a suit of corduroys, send him some hairpins to tuck his long hair up under a black slouch hat I have here, and a razor for him to shave off his mustache and imperial if he wishes to, with an outfit of books, which were left here by a book agent who was killed for lying some two years ago, having said in one day that he was a Jew, Methodist, Catholic and infidel, for he belonged to any creed the man did he wished to sell his books to."

"And some one killed him?"

"Yes, one of the boys played it on him under different disguises, pretending to be several different persons, and a row followed and the book agent was killed, the first case on record, I believe."

Jack Tobin then brought out the book agent's outfit and other things, and finding that he could carry Buffalo Bill a fairly good disguise, Lieutenant Willis bundled all up together and decided to go out after an early breakfast to meet the scout, as he had in view making another visit before his return to Herders' Ranch.

When the coach came into the Ranch the lieutenant was up, had had his breakfast and gave Ned Nordeck his letter to Colonel Kane.

"I'm sorry you are not goin' back with me, sir, but then you will, I guesses, next time, and I has company this time, as you sees," said Ned, alluding to several men in miner garb who were going on in the coach to the mines up about Santa Fe.

The news that Lieutenant Willis had found a dead man on the trail, in returning from Taylor Travis' ranch, and brought the body in with him, did not create more than a ripple of excitement in Herders' Ranch, a few going to see who he was and recognizing him as a cowboy upon one of the small ranches.

It was at once put down that he had been murdered and robbed, and he had been quietly buried in the graveyard of the Ranch, which, as some of the boys

said, was running a close record for numbers in inhabitants, "Last trail," as the cemetery was called, having very few less bodies than Herders' Ranch had souls in it.

Mounting another fine horse furnished him by Jack Tobin, the lieutenant set out for the place where he was to meet Buffalo Bill, carrying the scout's bundle with him.

He rode at an easy canter, and the good horse cast the miles behind him without the slightest fatigue to himself.

He passed the spot where he had left Buffalo Bill the night before, then turned off to the left for the hills, and in half an hour had entered the dense woodlands.

He had not ridden very far before he gave a hail, for his arrangement had been to meet the scout later in the day and at the edge of the timber.

His hail was at once answered from a few hundred yards away, and he recognized the scout's well-known voice.

Then he turned out of the trail he was following and soon came in sight of Buffalo Bill coming toward him.

The scout was on foot, and as he drew near called out:

"I'm mighty glad to see you, sir, for I was just going to put this note on a stick in the trail, hoping you would see it when you came this afternoon."

"You have made a discovery, then?"

"Yes, sir; and one that I intended to take advantage of, so I was going to leave."

"I had simply written here for you, knowing you would understand it."

"Was compelled to go toward T—. Will see you when you go back to T—."

"I signed no name, in case another found it before you came, and I was mighty glad to hear you hail, for now you are here I can tell you what has happened and what I intend to do."

Lieutenant Willis felt sure that something of importance had occurred, and, following the scout through the woods, he soon came to where he had passed the night, and started as he beheld a man lying upon the ground, and apparently dead.

CHAPTER XXV.

A FIGHT IN THE DARK.

Lieutenant Willis saw that the man lying upon the ground was a Mexican.

He was large in stature, and had a bearded face and short-cropped hair.

He was dressed like a Texas cowboy, and a belt of arms and a rifle lay near him.

Staked out near Buffalo Bill's horse was an animal above the mustang size, long-limbed, gaunt-bodied, and with every indication of strength, speed, and endurance.

Hanging upon a limb near was a Mexican saddle, bridle, and lasso.

That he was dead a closer look revealed to the officer, and more, he saw no fewer than four wounds upon the man.

"Who is he, Bill?"

In response the scout handed the lieutenant a note, saying:

"It is in Spanish, sir, and I read it but indifferently."

The officer took the note, which was in an unsealed envelope, and addressed simply in Spanish:

"TO RATTLE,

"By Viper."

Opening it, the lieutenant read, also in Spanish:

"The bearer, Viper, is a new man, but to be trusted."

"After getting the stores from C—, put them in the cliff cavern, and disperse, until a call from

"COBRA."

"Viper will bring me word of success or failure."

"Well, Bill, I think I see something in this, but you doubtless read between the lines far better than I do, so what do you make of it?"

"Just this, sir."

"I have heard that, like Captain Cobra, all of his men are named after some reptile."

"Now, Rattle stands, in my opinion, for Rattlesnake, and he is doubtless the leader in charge of some act of outlawry."

"Viper is plain, and he is a new man, but is to be trusted, and he is to bring back news of success or failure of what is to be done to Cobra, who is no doubt Captain Cobra, and the writer of this note."

"The C and dash must stand for coach, and the stores are what it is robbed of."

"The cliff cavern is, I think, the place where Captain Cobra hid the day I chased him so close, and which you know how I afterward discovered, but he does not know that I am aware of the secret hiding place, and he considers it a good place to put the booty."

"Bill, you have read it out as though it was so written; but how did you get the note?"

"Well, sir, I can lay it to my Death Charm, I suppose, for that fellow was a fighter."

"He came along the trail last night at a gallop, soon after I got into camp."

"I heard him some distance off, and ran to the trail to head him off, for I was sure that you were returning for some reason, or it was my Masked Man in Black."

"I halted him, knowing you would recognize my voice and answer, for it was dark in the timber."

"A savage Spanish oath and a shot followed my challenge, and the bullet cut through my hat, a close call."

"Instantly I decided to have my man, and, leaping out into the trail, seized the bridle rein as he was dashing by."

"Then followed the closest and hottest duel of my life, and only the fact that his revolver went back on him saved me."

"He pulled trigger the moment I grasped his bridle, but his cap snapped."

"My shot wounded him."

"Again his cap snapped, and my shot told."

"But he was game, and, cursing me in Spanish, he still continued to pull trigger, as I did."

"Five times the weapon missed fire, and four times my bullets hit him, for as the horse was mad with fright and I had hard work to hold him, I missed one shot."

"What a terrible and remarkable fight, Bill."

"It was the closest call and fiercest fight of my life, sir, and the man was dead game to the very last."

"My last shot brought him from the saddle, and, having quieted his horse, I went to him, but he was dead."

"I brought him over to my camp, and went back for his horse."

"Then, as I did not wish to build a fire that might attract the attention of some one, I turned in for the balance of the night, to await for daylight, and I needed the rest."

"What a remarkable coincidence that five of his shots missed fire."

"Yes, sir. The first sent a bullet through my hat, but the other five snapped, fortunately for me."

"Your Death Charm holds its power yet, Bill," said the officer, with a smile.

"Yes, sir, it would seem so."

"But tell me the rest of your story."

"When dawn came, sir, I saw just what my shots had done, and it is a wonder he had the strength to still fight on."

"This note he had upon him, a belt of gold about his waist, and his weapons are the very best, while the horse he rode is the very animal I tracked from the grave here," and Buffalo Bill knew that his words would surprise the lieutenant.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE SCOUT'S RESOLVE.

Lieutenant Willis had listened with the greatest attention to all the scout had to tell of his midnight adventure.

"Well, Bill, you have the most remarkable way of getting into scrapes, and the most clever manner of extricating yourself that I have ever heard of."

"But you feel very sure that the horse of this man is the same ridden from the upper country by the man you tracked and whom you regard as surely the one who killed Doctor Drayton?"

"Of the last I shall not assert positively, sir, but the horse is the same, there is no mistake there."

"You are generally on the safe side."

"You see, sir, I noted that track well, the peculiarities about it, measured all four feet, and noted the way the horse had of stepping."

"Three points I noticed at once in the tracks of this horse, when I led him to water this morning, with no idea of observing if he was the same animal I had tracked."

"Then I led him into soft ground, noted each hoof-print, and measured it, observed just how he stepped, and I am sure he is the animal."

"Then the rider must be the Man in Black?"

"I don't think that, sir, for he is a Mexican, and Ned Nordeck said the Man in Black spoke with no accent."

"This man cursed me in choice Spanish and English, and the latter, I observed, had a decided accent in the two or three words he uttered."

"Where do you think this man came from?"

"That I could find out, if I had time, by trailing him; but it is more important for me to go on now, and look up the men he was going to meet."

"There may be a number of them."

"True, sir; but I shall be in very little danger."

"How so?"

"I don't like much playing the part of a dead man, but I shall hunt up Rattle and pretend to be Viper."

"Bill, this risk is too desperate."

"I think not, sir, for I shall ride his horse, carry his outfit, take the note along, and play Viper for all I am worth."

"But you do not speak Spanish well enough not to betray yourself."

"That's all right, sir, for nothing is said in the note that I am a Mexican, though Rattle is doubtless one, and that is why it was written in Spanish."

"I don't like this adventure of yours a bit, Bill."

"See the results, sir, if successful."

"I shall strike the stage trail, follow it up to the scene where they attack it, for I will be too late to save it, and then track the outlaws from there to their lair and present my letter."

"Supposed to be one of them, though a new man, no secrets will be hidden, and I will find out just who Captain Cobra is and where he is."

"I will also know where the booty they get from the coach is taken, should the cliff cavern not be the place I think it is, so that will not be lost."

"Well, there is much to find out, I admit, yet I do not like to see you taking such desperate chances; but did I tell you that the coach had a number of passengers going through this morning?"

"No, sir. How many?"

"Five."

"Did you see them, sir?"

"Yes."

"Who were they?"

"Miners on their way to Santa Fe, Ned said."

"Americans?"

"Three were Mexicans, I think."

"Tlicy, with Ned, would make six, so it would be a brisk fight if they resisted."

"Yes, and the miners will generally fight, and all of these men were well armed."

"Do you know if Ned carried any treasure, sir?"

"Yes, a most valuable one, he told me—a lot of money going on to Santa Fe to the bank there."

"I wonder if these five men were really miners, sir, or the Cobras in disguise, knowing of the money going through, and determined to take it when they met comrades on the trail, for the writer of this note seemed to know of something of value going through when he spoke of stores."

"I am afraid you have hit it, Bill, and it will break poor Ned Nordeck's heart if it is so."

"Well, sir, we'll heal it with the revenge he will have, if he is not put out of the way by the gang; but I had better be off, for I wish to get on as rapidly as possible."

"I have dug a grave, as you see, for the body, sir, and will wrap him in his blanket

and bury him, which I was about to do when I heard you come."

"I shall ride his horse, making mine the pack animal, for I can cover my saddle and bridle up in that way, and use the Mexican's."

"And do you wish me to do anything, Bill?"

"You might follow on his trail, sir, if you wish, and see just where it leads, though I really think, sir, if you don't mind the hard riding, it would be best for you to return to the Ranch and send a courier through to the fort to-night, asking Colonel Kane for a dozen scouts and a score of your troopers to meet you at the ford, where you can go into a secret camp and be near if I have to call upon you for aid, for I am sure that the Cobras only pretended to disband, that they might allay all fears, and then make some big haul."

"I will go through to the fort to-night myself, and get the men, for I do not mind the ride in the least," was the plucky answer of the young officer.

CHAPTER XXVII.

LIEUTENANT WILLIS ON THE TRAIL.

The body of the Mexican was quickly but decently buried, and the horses were then saddled, Buffalo Bill covering his own saddle, a peculiar and handsome one, with a serape, hanging the bridle on the horn, and packing upon it his own clothes, outfit, and the bundle of disguises brought him by the lieutenant.

Rigged up in the suit of the Mexican, sombrero and all, cutting off his handsome imperial without a murmur, pinning up his long hair upon the top of his head and wrapping about it, as the Mexicans frequently do, a gay silk bandana, taken from about the neck of the dead man, he said, with a smile:

"Now, Señor Americano, how for my disguise?"

"You look the Mexican to perfection, Bill, only your accent would betray you."

"I don't intend to play Mexican, sir, only a Texan who has turned Dago."

"You'll pass, for I would not know you. I assure you—in fact, would avoid you if I saw you on a trail, as a man who would bear watching," laughed the lieutenant.

"And the truth is, I will bear watching, sir; but, good-by, and if you come through to-night, and I am not too much taken up with my Greaser friends, I'll try and meet you upon the trail."

"Do so, for I would like to take the latest news through to Colonel Kane."

"Then be on the watch for a hold-up, sir, though I will warn you who I am by giving a shrill whistle before I hail."

"I'll remember, and will be on the watch after I reach the hill country out from the Ranch."

"I wish you would take an escort, sir."

"I will not need any, Bill—good-by," and the two friends grasped hands and parted.

Buffalo Bill took the trail to the northward, his faithful horse following without being led, and after seeing him disappear, Lieutenant Willis said:

"Well, of all men I know that is the most remarkable."

"He does, indeed, bear a charmed life, and when he undertakes any work he goes at it heart, soul and body, and no danger deters him, no risk backs him out, no matter how desperate."

"Some day I predict for him a great future, if the Death Charm still protects him, though, of course, that is all nonsense."

"Now to myself."

"It is a pretty good jump from here to Evergreen Ranch, but I do not care to leave Herders' Ranch until to-night for the fort, so I will follow this trail, as Cody suggested, and see where it leads."

"I hope it will lead me in the direction of Evergreen Ranch, for I would like to stop and merely inquire if Miss Reeves has suffered any shock from her adventure yesterday."

"If it does not lead me in that direction I fear I cannot follow it far, for I must start with nightfall for Taos, and be there by dawn."

Thus deceiving himself that he was only anxious to know if Rose Reeves was ill

from her adventure, the lieutenant went to the scene of the night encounter between Buffalo Bill and the Mexican to pick up the trail.

The hoof-marks there showed how hard the horse had struggled to free his rein from the iron grasp of the scout, and that the rider had goaded him cruelly with his spurs to ride down the man that had barred his way there was no doubt.

Noting well the tracks of the horse, Lieutenant Willis, who was a pretty good scout himself, started off upon the trail.

He rode rapidly, and found that it led back to where he had turned off the trail from Herders' Ranch to meet Buffalo Bill.

He passed the place where he had met the horse bearing the body of the dead kidnapper, and from there the trail branched off over the prairie.

Still following it, he came to a little creek fringed with willows, and it went into the water.

But it did not come out on the other side.

"He has gone either up or down the stream here, and used this means to throw any one off the track should his trail be followed.

"Of course I have no time to go up the creek, as that would take me in the direction Cody has gone, and it must be, if he came from the ranches, that he came this far up the creek, and turned off here into the prairie to go to the spot where not half an hour after he lost his life.

"I will go down the stream, for that leads toward the ranches."

The lieutenant was rather glad of the chance to go in that direction, for, as nearly as he could figure out, it was the same creek that led right by the Evergreen Ranch.

About two miles below the trail crossed the creek, which he had followed in leaving the home of Taylor Travis the night before, and it was just there the young ranchero had parted with him.

Remembering that Taylor Travis had told him that there was a trail leading from there down to Evergreen Ranch, and seeing no tracks leaving the creek just then, the officer decided that he should continue on down the stream.

So he turned into the trail, and leaving the Travis ranch five miles away on his left, he rode at a rapid pace for Evergreen, some ten miles distant ahead of him.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE VISIT.

A long way off over the prairie, Rose Reeves, seated upon the broad piazza of her comfortable cabin home, beheld a horseman following a trail running along the creek which flowed by the Evergreen Ranch.

She arose, took up a spy glass that hung upon a rack near, and leveled it at the coming horseman.

"Why, it is Lieutenant Willis, for he is in uniform, and it can be no other.

"Can he have lost his way, I wonder?"

With this she called out to her mother, who was in the house, that they were to have company to supper, and, going to her room, made herself, as she supposed, more presentable, though she certainly looked very lovely in the pretty muslin dress she wore.

She was back again in time, however, for the lieutenant, as he approached, to see her seated, book in hand, upon the piazza.

She welcomed him cordially, called a servant to take his horse, and said that her father was out at the cowboys' camp, but would soon return, and her mother would be out to welcome him in a few minutes.

Lieutenant Willis mentally decided that she was the loveliest and sweetest girl he had ever met, and envied Taylor Travis for having won such a treasure to make his life happy.

He explained that he had not been lost, but had ridden out to meet a scout with whom he had some business, and who was upon the trail of the kidnappers, but that he did not wish it referred to, nor had he cared to have any one at Herders' Ranch know just where he had been.

Then he stated that he had decided to

ride by Evergreen, to see if the shock of the day before had caused her any nervousness, and to suggest that she should not again leave the Ranch alone, as it might not be safe for her to do so.

That he was to return to Fort Taos that night he also made known, and of his visit the day before to Taylor Travis he spoke most pleasantly.

"Yes, Mr. Travis has a lovely home, for this wild country, and father, mother and I have dined with him several times."

There was no sign of what her feelings might be toward the young ranchero in what she had said, and the lieutenant adroitly tried to draw her on to speak of the man whom rumor said she was interested in above all others.

But Rose Reeves as adroitly avoided any remark that led him to understand what her feelings were; in fact, she seemed to wish not to talk of the ranchero at all.

Mrs. Reeves gave the young officer a friendly greeting, and Mr. Reeves coming in soon after, he also was most cordial, and insisted that Lieutenant Willis should remain the night at Evergreen.

But he told them that he must return to Herders' Ranch with all speed, to get a pack horse, and go on to the fort that night.

Seeing that he was decided, Mrs. Reeves said she would have an early supper, and the father and daughter would ride with him a few miles on his way.

Incidentally Lieutenant Willis mentioned that he had found a dead man on his ride to Herders' Ranch the night before, "some one who had been shot," and he had taken the body on to the settlement with him.

He also stated that it would be well for Mr. Reeves to keep a night watch about his ranch, hold his cowboys well in hand, and not allow his daughter to leave her home, as he had reason to know that the Cobras were not really disbanded, though he did not wish this information to go any further, not even to the other ranchers or cowboys.

After enjoying one of the tempting meals for which Evergreen Ranch was noted, Lieutenant Willis set out for Herders' Ranch, the father and daughter accompanying him, he insisting that they should go only so far as to allow them to return to their home by sunset.

It was at the scene of the attack upon Rose that they halted to turn back, and Mr. Reeves looked closely over the ground, but could find no clew as to who the kidnappers could have been, other than that the two slain ones were recognized as cowboys from the neighboring ranches.

What had become of the third man who had escaped, Mr. Reeves could not tell, and if Rose had any suspicion as to who the fourth one had been, the real leader who had remained in the background, she kept it to herself.

Bidding the father and daughter good-bye, the lieutenant started on his ride to Herders' Ranch, Rose remarking:

"You ought not to ride through to Taos to-night alone, and we will be anxious until we learn that you arrived in safety.

"I wish that you had that splendid scout, Buffalo Bill, of whom I have heard so much, but have never seen, to accompany you."

"Can a woman keep a secret?" asked the officer, slyly.

"Try me."

"Maybe I may see Buffalo Bill before I reach Taos. Now I will know where it comes from if I hear of this secret, for your father will not tell."

"I said try me," she said, with an arch smile, and as he rode on at a rapid gallop, she continued:

"Father, Lieutenant Willis did not tell half he knows, and I am sure he is plotting some blow against the Cobras, and Buffalo Bill has not gone to the Northwest, but is aiding him."

"It may be so, and I hope that it is, for Willis is a most able commander and handled the large force under him in the battle near Herders' Ranch in most masterly style, while Buffalo Bill is a born

general as well as a scout, and I was much pleased with him; but see, at that pace the lieutenant will reach the Ranch shortly after nightfall," and he pointed to the officer, who was dashing along at a sweeping gallop.

The ranchero was right, for it was soon after dark when Lieutenant Willis rode into the stables of Sleepwell Tavern, and half an hour after, mounted upon a splendid animal, Jack Tobin's own riding horse, he was on his trail for Taos.

CHAPTER XXIX.

NED NORDECK'S BOX PARD.

When Ned Nordeck pulled out of Herders' Ranch, his team going well, a cigar between his teeth, and a miner seated upon the box with him, he was not in the best of humors, for he had hoped to have the company of Lieutenant Willis on the long ride, instead, as he told Jack Tobin:

"A guy like that."

And he pointed to the man who was to be his outside passenger.

But Ned Nordeck admitted to himself that he had mistaken his man before he had ridden very far.

"Have another cigar, for yours is about burned out, pard," was the way the stranger broke the ice.

Ned accepted.

"Was it not about here that there was a big battle fought lately?" asked the stranger.

"Right on this ridge ahead, and the gent who came out from Taos with me was the officer in command, along with Buffalo Bill, ther great scout, now gone back to ther Northwest, whar' he is Chief o' Scouts," replied Ned, not in the least disturbed at asserting what he knew was not so, for the reader is aware that he knew that Buffalo Bill had not gone away.

"It was a great victory for the soldiers."

"And the settlers, for Herders' Ranch and ther ranches turned out a big force, and they caught the Injuns between ther soldiers and themselves, and oh, my! Wal, ther redskins hain't quit wailin' over it yet, I guess."

Then Ned described the battle, which he knew nothing about, having heard no less than forty different versions regarding it, and the stranger listened attentively, at last remarking:

"You have driven this trail for years?"

"No, I hain't."

"I thought some one told me so."

"They was stuffin' yer, or lied knowingly, for drivers in these parts don't drive no trails for years."

"Why not?"

"They don't live long enough."

"Is the country unhealthy?"

"Wal, thar' is a disease here that are quite fatal ter many."

"What is it?"

"Bullet fever."

"Ah!"

"Then the drivers catch it?"

"You bet they does."

"Are many killed?"

"Wal, on ther Taos trail I drives, from Sandy Sink through Herders' to Fort Taos, a one hundred mile run, there has been five deaths in ther past three years."

"Five drivers have been killed?"

"Sure, and seven others has been run off ther trail, not wishin' ter go ter glory from a stage box, and two has been wounded so bad they is laid up, crippled."

"That is a bad record for the trail, indeed."

"Were you ever shot at?"

"Was I ever shot at?"

"Yes."

"Does yer see this wound in my left hand?"

"A bullet chipped a piece out off there, ther scar on my cheek?"

"Yes."

"A bullet chipped a piece out of there, and I has a piece o' lead in my leg now, and a wound in my body."

"Oh, yes, pard, I has been shot at sundry times, and I'm glad it was no worse."

"You are a brave man to still drive the trail."

"See here, pard, if I wasn't a brave man I'd cut my throat, for a coward ought to die, and I don't mean ter praise myself, nuther."

"You expect to still stick to the trail, then."

"Pard, I am a driver."

"I went into the work from love o' horses, driving and to be out in God's fresh air, looking at the beauties of nature he had made."

"I took slim chances when I began, for it wasn't in the Injun and Cobra country; but when I was sent here, I wouldn't back down when they told me this box had been the execution block of a number of good men."

"If better men than I be was willing to die here doing their duty, then I might risk it, I thought, and I am still risking it, and so far has only been picked, but some day or night I'll get a bullet through my heart or brain, and then I will take the trail so many has gone before me, so many has yet ter go, and the end of which only the dead knows, for none ever come back."

"You take it very calmly."

"What is ther use o' frettin'."

"I sleeps well when off duty, I comes up fer my feed three times a day reg'lär, I enjoys a drink in season, a cigar on a drive, I likes a clever pard with me, shakes my foot at a fandango with a pretty gal, can swap a lie with any man, and enjoys living for all it is worth."

"I hates a mean man as I does a snake, don't pick no quarrels, nor allow no man to impose on me, and if ther Cobras sees their way clear ter kill and rob men fer gold, instead of work fer it, that's a matter with their own conscience, and if they gets into trouble, I hain't hard on 'em, fer they has ter answer fer their sins, not me."

"You are certainly a philosopher."

"Waal, I don't know what a philosopher is, but as yer hain't had no reason ter call me bad names, maybe I is, ef yer say so, only don't explain if it's mean, for maybe you'd hev' to hoof it on ter Taos."

The passenger laughed, and explained what a philosopher was, and Ned replied:

"You knows, fer you seem educated, and I hain't got no more knowledge than what I picks up from what nature and human kind teaches me."

CHAPTER XXX.

THE OVERLAND DETECTIVE.

The passenger on the box with Ned seemed much entertained with his conversation, and asked him about the ride on beyond Taos.

"Waal, that's an all-kind-of-a-drive, rough, pleasant, dangerous, and safe, according to what turns up; but I has only been over it a few times, taking the place of Ben Bird, who were kilt by the Comanches until they could put a regular man on."

"And the ride from Herders' Ranch to Fort Summer?" asked the stranger.

"That's another gantlet of death ter run, for they knocks 'em over there more than they do on my drive."

"It's only a few weeks ago a driver was kilt and an army officer wounded, while the Cobras got big money from their haul; but a Lieutenant Balfour at the fort came ter Herders' Ranch, met Buffalo Bill, and they got ther money back, and downed one o' ther gang."

"Lem Luby is drivin' the run now, and he's about as game as they make 'em, pard."

"How is it when you meet Indians?"

"Run for it like the deuce, shootin' as we goes."

"I've had two chases, and I knows what they is, so I drives racehorses in my team."

"And if the Cobras hold you up, what do you do?"

"Pard, I is here ter perfect my passengers and freight as far as it lies in my power to do, but I wasn't born a fool, and if I sees ther chances are big ag'in' me, I jist does ther right thing—lets 'em rob ther outfit, and pray ter some day get even."

"If I sees a chance, no odds is goin' ter make me let it go without a fight."

"You are a brave man, pard, and I hope you will long live to drive this trail," replied the passenger, and after some further conversation, he said he was sleepy and would get into the coach and have a nap, where he did not fear falling off, as if he dropped to sleep upon the box.

Ned drew rein for him, and he got inside.

As he drove on again, Ned mused to himself:

"Now that man hain't sich a fool as I tu'k him for."

"He's dressed rough, and looks like a gold digger, but he can talk like a eddicated gent, and I guess hev' seen better times than wild life out here!"

"I hope he'll come up on ther box ag'in, for I finds him entertaining."

This was a fact, as Ned had done all the talking himself.

The passenger did come back on the box again, after an hour's ride inside, and said:

"Pard Nordeck, do you know who I am?"

"I doesn't."

"You have quite a rich freight along."

"Who said so?"

"I say so."

"You thinks so."

"I know so."

"You knows more than I does."

"No, I do not; but it is your duty to say that you have not."

"Now I know that there is a large sum of greenbacks going through to a bank in Santa Fe, and you have some Government money besides, with valuable Express matter for the fort, and an important registered mail."

"You thinks you has it down fine."

"I have, as you will see."

He took from his pocket an official envelope, and taking a letter from it, read:

"Detective Carrol, of the United States Secret Service Corps, is hereby commanded to select a guard of picked men from his force, and guard the mail coach that carries a large sum of money to the First National Bank in Santa Fe, also some Government funds sent to the paymaster at Fort Taos, valuable Express matter, and an important mail, some of it registered.

"By order of THE CHIEF."

Ned Nordeck gave a whistle at hearing this, and then said:

"Let me see that paper, pard."

"Pardon me, but I am not allowed to trust it out of my hands; but I read it to you to let you feel you need have no anxiety about being robbed of your valuable freight, as we are here to protect you."

"Them is your men inside?"

"Yes."

"Not miners?"

"No."

"All detectives?"

"Yes."

"Five?"

"Yes; five of them."

"Well, I hope the Cobras won't jump us, for ther fight will be hot, or there won't be any."

"How do you mean?"

"Waal, I means this:

"I has traveled trails a long time, and I mind when I come out of Herders' Ranch with two on top, and eight inside, including me, eleven of us."

"Well, them men was armed all over, and ter hear them talk I just hoped ther Cobras would be on hand, for we'd plant a graveyard right whar' they tackled us."

"Them men sung big, sung loud, and I began ter feel sorry for ther Cobras."

"At last we come to a place whar' ther Cobras had jumped me afore, and that was several green mounds on ther side of ther trail which nobody can mistake for other than what they is."

"I hed seen ther bodies planted in 'em."

"Waal, all of a sudden, loud and pipin' come a cry ter hold up."

"I were covered with a gun, I seen that, and so I halted quick."

"Then ther robber, for there were but one in sight, he says that he has twenty men, and would kill ther horses and riddle ther coach if there was any sign of fight."

"Then ther singing was low ter soft

music, for it turned into beggin' and prayin' fer mercy."

"Thet outlaw chief then made 'em git out one by one and lay down."

"Then he picked 'em clean; he tu'k every dollar, watch and chain they hed, and they hed a great deal, for they was a lot of young fellers goin' ter ther fort ter ther weddin' of a young officer they knew."

"Oh, how they prayed, sandwichin' profanity in with prayer; they begged, promised, and all to no good, for the outlaw got it all."

"Did you lose much?"

"Bless yer, he never bothered me, though I hed a big freight aboard, only ther men who was goin' ter wipe ther Cobras off ther face of ther arth."

"He let you go on, then?"

"Yas; told me ter hump along, and I did so, and it were like a funeral procession all ther rest o' ther way, for them gents was so quiet."

"They all hed weddin' presents fer ther lady and gent who was ter be married, and them was tu'k too, and ther party had come all ther way from New York."

"And they never recovered their things?"

"Every dollar and everything else was waitin' fer 'em at ther fort, for the outlaw chief was Lieutenant McKenny Willis, who hed made bets with brother officers he could hang up ther whole outfit, which he did, and all alone, and won his bets, too, and ther joke nearly kilt them ten fellers," and Ned laughed heartily at the remembrance of the young officer's practical joke upon the tenderfeet wedding guests.

CHAPTER XXXI.

NED NORDECK SURPRISED.

The detective had listened with interest to Ned's story, but then seemed to think that it reflected upon the courage of his men and himself, so said:

"So you think we would surrender, too, if the outlaws held up the coach?"

"Waal, you hasn't been singing loud of what you would do, and as fightin' is ye'r trade, I guesses you'd do some shootin', but I want ter tell you that no matter how brave men is, and how many, when they hears ther order of 'Hands up or die!' from ther thicket or behind a rock, they does jist what they is told ninety-nine times in a hundred."

"I has driven brave men over this line, I hain't no coward myself, but I has seen them hand over their valuables, and I has fished in my pockets and got out my little pile, fer a revolver muzzle p'intin' in ye'r face is a mighty strong argument, and extends a very pressin' invitation fer yer ter come down out of ye'r tree."

"No, pard, yer is caught in a ambush, and though men loves ther money, they jist lets it go when it comes to a question or gold or life."

"Then you think sending me along with my four men as a guard is a poor protection to the coach?"

"That's what I thinks."

"I am sorry."

"Now you may be used ter thief-catchin', crook-chasin', and all that, but when it comes ter sendin' tenderfeet out here ter down Cobras they hain't in it a little bit."

"If you was Buffalo Bill, now, with four scouts, that officer I spoke of, Lieutenant Willis, and a squad of soldiers, come expressly for a fight, ter trap ther trappers, then when they got ther word they wouldn't be knocked silly by scare and surprise, but would pile out and go at it, and ther chances are Mr. Cobra would have ter crawl fer ther nearest hole ter hide it."

The detective laughed, and then the relay was reached, where a change of horses was made.

The men got out, stretched their legs and talked with the two stock-tenders, and the trip was resumed.

The detective again returned to the box, and after going a number of miles, he asked:

"Was there a hold-up anywhere near here?"

"Right on ahead, and yer'll see ther graves I told yer of."

"It was there that Lieutenant Willis, masked and in rough clothes, held up ther weddin' party."

"Don't pass the place without showing me."

"I won't, for it's ther boss place fer a hold-up."

"Have another cigar."

Ned accepted the invitation, and soon after said:

"Thar' is ther place now, and ef ther Cobras hadn't been scared off ther trail by Buffalo Bill, yer might hev' a chance ter find out how bad a hold-up would scare yer, pard."

"Pard Nordeck, I have a favor to ask of you."

"Well, ef I kin I'll do it."

"Just draw rein a minute."

"Yer wants ter see ther place, does yer?" and Ned halted his team.

The stage doors flew open upon either side, the four men sprang out, and as they did so the man on the box cried:

"The favor I wished to ask is this: I don't wish you to be a fool, for you are a brave man, and I do not wish to harm you; but I am a detective for the Cobras, and have spotted the valuable cargo you carry, and we want it."

The revolver had already looked squarely into the face of Ned Nordeck, and a furtive glance showed him that four other weapons were covering him, and he raised his hands above his head, crying out:

"Oh, Lord, be merciful ter me, a fool."

The men laughed, and the pleasant fellow, who Ned had thought had been so very entertaining as a listener, said:

"We are five against you, Ned, and there is no chance for you."

"I like you, and I told my men they should not kill you, as was planned, for you were to be shot in the back from the coach window."

"You shall not lose a dollar yourself—"

"Don't say that, for I has a hundred along of my own money, and ther fine watch and chain ther officers at ther fort give me, and ther diamond pin in my scarf that ther boys at ther Ranch made me a present of; so take 'em all, take 'em all!" cried Ned.

"But we don't wish to rob you, a poor driver."

"Never mind me! Rob me, or shoot me, take your choice, for if ther company has ter lose I don't want ter save mine; so take it all, pards."

"Well, it might get you into trouble to save your things and lose the company's, so we'll take all."

"You see, the Cobras are not driven off the trail yet by Buffalo Bill."

"I can swear to that fact."

"We let up, for he was crowding us close, found our stronghold, and raided it, and so we lay low for a while."

"But, you see, we gained by it, for the money and valuables began to go through again, and the Fort Summer coach will carry a big freight when it pulls out at midnight from Herders' Ranch."

"Lord! and I can't save it!"

"You can't save your own, and you won't get into Fort Taos until night, and unless you can fly you will not be able to warn Lem Luby, of the Summer coach," was the reply of the outlaw.

CHAPTER XXXII.

LEFT ALONE.

Ned sat watching the plunderers as they took the money and valuables out of his strong box, and then the mail bag, which they did not open.

All were put into a couple of thick canvas bags, which were strapped together so that they could be thrown across a saddle.

"You will have to delay here until our men come to meet us, as, if they do not put in an appearance, there being some mistake about the place of meeting us, we will have to take your horses, Ned."

"How in thunder will I get on, then?"

"You will have to foot it, for if we have to ride from here we can be easily followed, while our men, if they come, will not ride a horse within a couple of miles

of here, and on foot we will not leave a trail."

"But yer won't need six horses."

"Not to ride, but to keep you from riding, yes, for you can't get in to the fort before morning, having to foot it."

"That's so," said Ned.

"It will be late to-morrow afternoon before I can get soldiers back here on your trail."

"Yes."

But Ned did not express aloud his thoughts that there was a relay station twenty miles this side of the fort, and the one he had passed seven miles back on the trail, and if they took his horses, he could go back there, send word to the ranch by one of the stock-tenders, and, getting fresh horses for his coach, push right on to the fort, arriving there by midnight, anyhow.

"Are you the chief?" he asked of the leader.

"I am the sub-chief."

"You hain't Cap'in Cobra, then?"

"No; but I'm one of the Snakes."

"What might be ye'r name, fer I'd like ter know yer more intimate."

"If I gave you my real name you would have the hounds of the law out here after me for a killing scrape I got into several years ago, so I'll tell you that in the band I am known as Rattlesnake Rob, called Rattle for short."

"Well, yer look it."

"Does yer know how much worth yer has got?"

"About forty thousand in all."

"You is right, and yer'll see that ther Government won't stand no such nonsense, nor ther company, nuther."

"What are they going to do about it?"

"Hang yer!"

"It's catchin' before hangin'."

"I has obsarved that; but I also hev' noticed that Buffalo Bill made some of yer dig dirt, and maybe he'll be sent for ag'in."

"I hope not."

"I don't wonder you is skeered."

"I tell you, Buffalo Bill is human, like any other man, and could have been picked off time and again, but the Cobras are dreadfully superstitious, and he wears a Death Charm that protects him, do you see?"

"I see that he has lived a long time up North without wearing no Death Charm, for he got that in some way after coming here, but just how he won't tell."

"Well, let him go without that Death Charm, and see how quick the Cobras will sting him to death."

Ned Nordeck laughed, and then asked:

"Whar' is Cap'n Cobra?"

"Here, there, everywhere."

"That means nothing."

"He may be here any minute, he may be in Herders' Ranch now, or at Fort Taos, or Summer."

"None of us know anything about his movements."

"Does yer know anything about that Queen of ther Trail?"

"As much as we do about Captain Cobra."

"That appears ter be next ter nothin'."

"About that."

"Is she ther chief's wife?"

"I do not know."

"Sister, maybe?"

"I could not tell you."

"That means yer won't."

"I really do not know, for she is as equally mysterlous as the captain."

The leader seemed now to be growing impatient, and his anxiety was shared by Ned Nordeck, who began to fear his horses would be taken.

But, after an hour's delay, and just as the leader had ordered the men to unharness the six horses, one of the outlaws called out:

"There they come!"

Through the timber was seen coming a man wearing a mask, and dressed in the green costume representing a snake's skin.

He was on foot, but carried a rifle on his shoulder, and came along at a brisk step.

As he approached, he saluted the leader and said:

"The horses are all ready, sir, if you are."

"We have been here an hour waiting."

"Any word from the chief?"

"Only that I was to have horses at a given point for you, and come on to this place to meet you, and come on foot, to leave no trail."

"So my instructions said."

"Come, men, unharness these horses, unfasten every buckle, and scatter the harness about."

"Then get the wrench and take the nuts off the wheels, and it will give Ned here a couple of hours' work to get ready to start on, and that will allow us ample time."

The orders were carried out, and Ned Nordeck was left standing alone in the trail, viewing his scattered harness and the work left for him to do, while the outlaws disappeared in the timber, carrying their booty with them.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE MEETING AT THE FORD.

Ned Nordeck was not a profane man, but he admitted that just then he tried a few choice oaths to see if they would comfort him.

To his surprise he discovered that they would not rise to the occasion, so he sat down to think over the situation.

But he sat for a moment only, and, springing to his feet, cried:

"I clean forgot Buffalo Bill."

"I'll meet him on ther trail ahead!"

This thought seemed to inspire him, for he quickly picked up the wrench, put the nuts on again, and then began to collect his pieces of harness.

This was no easy task, for every strap had been unbuckled and scattered.

But he got them together at last, put the harness upon his horses, hitched them to the coach, and, springing upon his box, called out:

"Now go like skeered antelopes!"

Away went the team, and Ned did not spare them.

He held the reins well in hand, kept his whip ready to touch up any horse that showed a sign of laziness, and east mile after mile behind him.

At last the descent began toward the river, and he was nearing the ford when he beheld a horseman riding along the bank and coming down the stream.

He had a horse following him, and as he rode out of the timber Ned Nordeck gave a yell that could have been heard a mile, and cracked his whip a dozen times by way of a salute.

"Buffalo Bill! Buffalo Bill!

"I'd rather se yer now than git a fortune."

"Ah! Ned, I thought you were on a racket when I saw you," said Buffalo Bill, as he halted by the coach.

"Pard Bill, I'm drunk clean through with mad."

"I tell yer I've been done fer awful."

"You have been robbed by Cobras who took passage in your coach, and they got a rich haul."

"You knows it all?"

"See here, I am in a different rig, you notice, and I started last night in disguise, but I got tired of it and let my hair down again, put on my hat and concluded to walt until I reached this trail before I rigged up again."

"I sees now that yer chin beard hev' been cut off, and them hain't your clothes."

"No, and I am on a little secret service work."

"That's what ther feller said that robbed ther coach."

Buffalo Bill laughed and replied:

"I did hope to get here in time to warn you, but it's a long and hard trail I have to travel, so I am too late to prevent the robbery, but may be able to recover the stolen goods."

"Now, drive on to the ford, and while our horses are resting I will tell you something."

Ned obeyed and the two sat down upon the river bank and Buffalo Bill told of his fight with the man in the dark, that he proved to be a messenger from Captain Cobra to the leader of the men who were

to rob the coach, and told just where the booty was to be stored and word sent back by the bearer.

"I did hope, Ned, to get to the trail in time to serve you, or soon after, so I could follow the band, deliver my note, and learn what I was after about them, their hiding place for the booty, new retreat, and who their chief was."

"But you have been plundered, so now I'll resume my disguise and take the trail of those fellows to deliver my note, anyway."

"Don't do it, Mr. Cody, I begs you."

"Why not?"

"They'll know you, and then you climbs ther golden stairs, sure as shootin'."

"Wait until you see me in my rig and you will admit you would not know me, and I will have a horse some of them must know, the note from the chief and I'll pass, see if I don't."

"I hopes so."

Buffalo Bill then told of his meeting Lieutenant Willis, who had gone toward the ranches to try and track the messenger from his starting point, and added that he was coming through to the fort during the night.

Then Ned Nordeck told the whole story of the ride from Herders' Ranch, all that the leader of the band of plunderers had told him, of the halt and the robbery, the coming of a man who reported horses were in waiting for them a couple of miles away, and how they had scattered his harness and did other things to delay him.

"I will see the lieutenant when he comes through, and by daybreak we will have that booty, if it has been taken where I suppose it has."

"If it has not, why I can circle around the place of hold-up, a couple of miles away, and strike their trail after they reached their horses, and track them."

"Then, when I find them, I am Captain Cobra's messenger, you know, and so can find out as such what I wish to know."

"Now, Ned, I wish you to tell the colonel the whole situation, and ask him to do what Lieutenant Willis was going to do."

"Ask him to send to the ford here a sergeant, corporal and sixteen men from Lieutenant Willis' troop, and Brazos Ben, Dot Driver and twelve other scouts, and start them off as soon as possible, and either Lieutenant Willis or myself will be here to meet them."

"I'll do it, sir; but now let me tell you that Lem Luby's coach is going to catch it too."

"How do you know this?"

"I'll tell yer," and Ned told what the road-agent had said:

"Luby leaves Herders' Ranch at midnight, and he will be held up soon after daybreak, about where Captain Baring was robbed, and I have time to go to my secret camp, leave these horses, get my other one, and head him off, and I will do it."

"But you tell the colonel what I told you, and have the men come here and I will try and see that the lieutenant is halted on his run through to-night in some way, but if I miss him, he will meet the men, so tell them to wait at my secret camp, for Brazos Ben knows it, only allow no man not in the secret to know that I am still in this part of the country."

"Now I'm off, and you had better push through at good speed," and, remounting his horse, Buffalo Bill crossed the river and rode hard for his secret camp, while Ned set his team going hard for the fort.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE SCOUT LYING IN WAIT.

Buffalo Bill found his horse left in camp looking lonesome, but still with his long stake line, finding grass in plenty to feed upon, and with the brook near for water.

He hastily cooked his supper, ate it, and then wrote on a slip of paper a few lines and put it in his pocket.

The horse he had gotten through the outlaw known as Viper, and his own horse, he securely staked out to await his return, while he put the dead man's saddle on his fresh horse, and carried along an extra lariat for some purpose.

Returning to the ford, Buffalo Bill crossed, and, dismounting, cut two long stakes.

These he drove into the ground on each side of the trail, which here descended to the river through a cut fifteen feet wide.

Tying the extra lariat to one of the stakes, some four feet from the ground, he crossed it to the next stake, looped it around it, and brought it again across the trail about six feet high.

To the center of the highest line he fastened his sheet of paper, leaving it to flutter in the wind.

Upon this the scout had written as follows:

"M. W.—Met C—too late."

"Work had been done. Sent request you were to make by N. N. to meet you at this point."

"I go on separate trail. B. B. or D. D. will explain hearing from N. N."

"Wait in my camp for me. "S."

"I guess he can interpret that," muttered Buffalo Bill.

"He will draw up to ford the river, and will see it sure."

"Now I must be off, and Comrade has got to travel, for dark is coming on and I have got to drop all else now to warn Lem Luby of the intended attack upon him, and it is mighty near a fifty-mile ride from here."

With this Buffalo Bill turned off of the trail to the right, and began to go across country, taking his own ideas of the way to guide his horse.

He had the points of the compass, the distances from place to place, the lay of the land, and the general directions the stage trails led down fine, so he knew just about where he would strike into the one leading from Herders' Ranch to Fort Summer.

He well knew that the coach driven by Lem Luby would leave the Ranch at midnight, drive along at a good pace until it struck the first relay, and then would reach the hill country and go slow, as the trail would be rugged, and it would be night.

Once in the hill country, and day having dawned, Lem Luby was liable to run upon the Cobras anywhere.

He would not come to another relay to change horses until fifteen miles this side of Fort Summer, and between the two relay stations the outlaws had been wont to act, the nature of the country protecting them in an escape.

So Buffalo Bill pushed ahead steadily, urging his horse into a canter whenever he could do so, and making the best time he was able.

Midnight came, and found him twenty miles away from the trail.

But he argued that Lem Luby had more than that distance to drive before he reached the spot where he wished to head him off.

Day dawned, and Buffalo Bill was but a few miles from the trail, and Luby was not due for a couple of hours.

So Buffalo Bill halted in a piece of meadowland bordering a brook, unsaddled his horse and staked him out, and then built a fire to cook his breakfast.

He was perfectly calm, and a confident smile was upon his face.

He was, as he said to himself, "playing to win," and he had the cards well in hand.

He ate a hearty breakfast, put out the fire, lighted his pipe, and leisurely saddled his horse, who was much refreshed by the hour's rest.

Mounting again, the scout pressed on, and in half an hour came out into the stage trail.

He turned in the direction of Herders' Ranch, and, riding a short distance, came to a scene that he remembered, so halted there.

Then he set to work, after staking his horse out, to get his disguise ready to put on, should there be any one on the coach box with Lem Luby.

Over half an hour he waited, and then came the rumbling of wheels, and he muttered:

"The coach is coming."

Anxious that Lem Luby should not mistake him for a road-agent, Buffalo Bill stood out in the trail where he could see him, and waited for the coach to come in sight.

Soon it did so, driving at a slow pace, and a glance at the trail ahead revealed the form of the scout to Lem Luby, who at once came to a halt.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE WARNING.

Taking off his sombrero, Buffalo Bill waved it, and beckoned Lem Luby on, for he saw that the driver did not recognize him at first glance.

But Lem quickly saw that the one who barred his way was the scout, and he gave a yell of delight, and drove on.

As he came to a halt he was about to give another yell, when Buffalo Bill put his finger upon his lips, and the driver at once said in a whisper:

"What are it, pard Buffalo Bill?"

"Trouble."

"Enough said."

"I thought you was a Cobra—don't shoot me—when I seen yer in ther trail, but when yer played yer cards I knew yer, and my heart dropped back where it lives, for it were crowdin' my tongue out between my teeth."

"I don't wonder that you were alarmed, Lem, for you have a very valuable freight aboard."

"You knows ther game, then?"

"Yes."

"Well, I declare."

"And so do the Cobras."

"Oh, Lord! I've played the wrong card."

"Not yet, for I rode all night to head you off to save the freight."

"Pard, you is a trump."

"Ned Nordeck was held up yesterday and robbed of a most valuable mail, Express, and his money box."

"My! my!"

"The gang played miners bound for Santa Fe, and rode through with him."

"I found it out by catching a man—these are his clothes I have on—and so I tried to head Ned off, but was too late, though I hope to get all back."

"Lieutenant Willis is on the trail, and will have scouts and soldiers ready by tomorrow to strike, for the Cobras are at their old game again."

"And playin' to win?"

"Y-e-s."

"What shall I do?"

"I came to help you out."

"Jist do, and I'll bless you, pard Cody."

"You have a very valuable cargo, so my idea is that you let me hold you up and take it all from you."

"You bet!"

"I will take it, or send it by my men into Herders' Ranch, and on your way back you can bring an officer and soldiers to carry it to the fort, under escort."

"You are playin' ye'r trumps now, pard."

"The Cobras will certainly catch you on ahead, and you can paralyze them by simply saying you were held up back on the trail by outlaws and robbed."

"We will make tracks here, and every sign of a halt and pillage of the coach, to show that you are telling the truth; in fact, will smash your strong box and leave it here, for I will have to take the things in my saddle-bags."

"If they wish to prove what you say these signs will do it, and you might say that you saw one man on horseback—myself, you know, and two on foot, you and I, for it will not be lying."

"Pard Cody, don't you worry about my lying, for I can do it when there is a reason. Why, I has had blisters on my tongue for weeks from dodgin' ther truth."

"All right, I am glad your conscience will not cause you to suffer to any great extent."

"Now let us get to work."

"Ther cards is shuffled, cut, and ther play begins," said Lem Luby, who, as an inveterate gambler when off duty, always "spoke by the cards" when he had anything to say.

The freight was a valuable one, even

more so than had been that carried by Ned Nordeck.

But Buffalo Bill packed it all away upon his horse, and the signs to indicate a robbery were scattered about.

"Now, Lem, tell the colonel just what I did, and that I turned road-agent from necessity to save your freight."

"Tell him if I cannot get the booty into Herders' Ranch on time, I will hide it, and send a letter to Jack Tobin for you, so the officer sent as an escort can find it."

"I'll tell him, sir."

"Now drive at a slow pace, and look like a very wretched man as you sit upon your box, as though you did not care whether you lived or died."

"I can look it; I used ter put that look on when my mother-in-law was around, for she drove me to drink; and to reform, I took to the trail and drove a coach."

"I'll wear my too-much-mother-in-law expression."

"Then you'll make the Cobras weep," said Buffalo Bill, as Lem gave him an example of how he intended to look.

"Maybe it will drive them ter throw up ther cards o' sin, and play ther game o' salvation."

"They will--when they die, not before."

"But my idea is you'll be held up about five miles from here, and if you delay all you can, it will give me over two hours' start of them, and that will be enough, for maybe if they follow me they will run upon a snag they are not looking for, if I can get to the lieutenant and his men."

"Good-by, Lem, and I hope the loss of the booty will not get you into trouble."

"I hopes not, but I'll take what comes, no matter how the game goes, if I can only save the jackpot," and Lem Luby, a rough diamond hero, drove on his way as Buffalo Bill mounted and rode off through the timber.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

A WISE PRECAUTION.

Lem Luby drove on his way playing his part well.

His team went along with loose reins, and the driver looked like one who had lost his pocketbook and best friend.

One door of the coach was open, the cushions were off the seats, the boxes beneath were open, and the rear boot was unstrapped.

The whole appearance of the driver and his coach was one of demoralization.

Thus Lem continued for several miles, and he then, in spite of his apparent dejection, began to cast anxious looks ahead of him.

He knew his danger if the Cobras suspected he had outwitted them on purpose.

They were liable to put a bullet through his brain and leave him dead in the trail, the coach standing near without a team.

No one knew better just what the Cobras were and would do than Lem Luby.

So he kept his eyes well abroad, and at last muttered:

"I guess it will be right thar', where they kilt my pard and wounded Cap'n Baring."

"Well, I'd like ter pass in ther game ef I were able, but if I can't I'll play my hand. I told yer so!"

It was himself whom Lem Luby had "told so," for this last remark was occasioned by suddenly seeing a masked man step out into the trail ahead of him and level a rifle full at him.

Others appeared also, as if by magic, upon each side of the trail, until Lem saw that there were seven of them.

They were all masked, and dressed in the garb of the Cobras, representing the skin of a snake, and with stuffed serpent skins as hat bands.

There was no need to utter the command of "Halt! and hands up!"

That rifle leveled at his heart spoke volumes, and Lem drew rein by calling to his horses and putting his foot hard upon the brake, while he called out:

"What! has I got ter be robbed ag'in?"

"Yes, Lem Luby, as long as you carry booty and the Cobras need pocket change you will have to be robbed," said the leader, stepping forward.

"Then yer ought ter go in cahoots, fer other gang got all I has."

"What do you mean?" asked the leader, sharply.

"Jist what I says, for all I hed was in ther Jackpot t'others got."

"What others?"

"Them that ordered me up back on ther trail."

"Where?"

"Some five miles back."

"When?"

"A leetle over a hour ago, for I has felt so bad since I hev' let ther team play ther hand they wanted to, and poke along same as a funeral outfit."

"Lem Luby, are you telling me the truth?" and the outlaws had all crowded around, now greatly excited.

"I c'u'dn't lie ef I tried ter; but it hain't no lie—I only wish it was."

"Your coach has been robbed?"

"Yes, and yer pards got a big haul."

"Our pards?"

"Yas, for they was rigged out same as you is."

"And they held you up and robbed you?"

"You bet; they played trumps and took my pile."

"How many?"

"I seen three of 'em only, but them was enough."

"One was on horseback, and thar' was two afoot, and they swept ther coach of chips."

"I believe you are lying."

"I feels downright hurt you should suspect me."

"I shall search you and your old hearse."

"You is welcome, for they cleaned my chips out along with ther balance."

"What did you have?"

"A big roll of money for the paymaster, another for the post trader, some Express packages of value, and some registered mail."

"That is right; but I can hardly believe your story."

"It's a pity, because you is a liar and cheats in ther game, yer suspects me."

The leader made no reply to this, but called his men apart, and they talked earnestly together for a while.

Then he returned, and three of the Cobras began to search the coach, and Lem Luby as well.

The search was a fruitless one, as the reader knows.

Then the leader said:

"See here, Lem Luby."

"Well?"

"We are going to return to the spot where you say you were robbed."

"Yer can go, an' bad luck with you," was the emphatic reply.

"But you go back, too."

"See here, pard Thief, I thinks I has suffered enough without being turned back on ther trall—besides, it's bad luck ter turn back."

"You have had your bad luck."

"I could have more."

"How so?"

"I wasn't called upon ter pass in my chips and tarn my bloomin' toes up to ther daisies."

"You will be, if we don't find it as you have said."

"What does yer mean?"

"I mean that you go with us back on the trail, and if there is not the proof we seek of what you say, we will kill you and leave you in your old hearse."

"God bless Buffalo Bill, fer ef he hadn't put ther signs thar', I'd hev' tu'k ther glory trail," muttered Lem Luby, with a heart full of thankfulness for the scout's thoughtfulness in manufacturing proof of the hold-up.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE PROOF.

Lem Luby put back over the trall with evident reluctance.

But there was nothing else for him to do than obey.

The outlaws went into the timber, mounted their horses and rode back with the coach, some ahead, some following behind it.

Lem saw that there were just seven of them.

He drove rapidly, for he knew he would be some four or five hours late in getting to Fort Summer, as it was.

He saw that the outlaws were very much disturbed by what he had told them. They did not understand who the other band of road-agents could be.

Lem Luby enjoyed their anxiety immensely, and called out to the leader:

"Don't yer know who it is that got my booty, pard Cobra?"

"Oh, yes; we know."

"You is lyin' now, sartin, for yer look as melancholy as a corpse at a buryin'."

"I tell you that I know," angrily called back the leader.

"And I says yer don't, for yer is skeered ter death; but somebody got it, and I tell yer that I thinks yer all has been done by some o' yer gang."

"Maybe it war' ther chief, fer he were a fine-looking feller that held me up."

"You said he was masked."

"I says so now; but he were tall, free-spoken, and too fine a gent ter be in ther road-agent trade, I tu'k it."

"There were three, you said."

"I seen three of 'em."

"If I'd 'a' know'd there wasn't more I'd hev' made a break for it."

"And gotten your head shot off."

"I'm right good myself in playin' trumps when ther playin' cards is shootin' irons."

"Oh, we know that, Lem Luby."

"You are a plucky fellow, a good fellow, a dead shot and take big chances in doing your duty, and it is just these virtues you possess that have saved your life scores of times."

"But though those men who held you up were Cobras, beyond a doubt, I cannot just place them, for you know that Buffalo Bill came down here and hunted us so hard the chief disbanded us."

"You hain't the King o' Clubs, then?"

"No, I'm a sub-officer."

"I thought maybe you was so perlue and such a nice looker, you might be ther Ace that wins ther game, fer I hears that Captain Cobra are a remarkable man."

The outlaw leader was riding alongside of the coach now, and he seemed much pleased with the flattery, for he said:

"Many mistake me for the chief, but I am only second in command."

Lem Luby laughed, and replied, in his fearless way:

"Wal, it's a wonder yer ever got that high, unless yer kin cut a throat better than any one else, for I was only jokin' when I called yer a gent, and said yer looked like ther chief, just givin' yer a little sweetenin' afore a bitter dose, for I does regard yer as a very hon'ry specimen o' a man, the worst card in ther deck."

"Look like ther chief?"

"Ho, ho, ho! Why yer is that bow-legged yer couldn't head a sow an' pig off in a lane, and they'd hev' ter put bay winders inter yer coffin for ther spreadin' out of yer legs. He, he, he!"

The enraged outlaw gave a look up at Lem to warn him to desist, and dropped his hand upon his revolver.

But Lem was mad clean through at being turned back, he had gotten reckless, and he always jeered the outlaws and defied them, so he continued:

"Look like ther King Snake o' ther nest indeed!"

"Why, yer wears yer mask ter keep yer face from frightenin' yer horse, for if he seen it he'd kick his shoes off tryin' ter hit yer with 'em. He, he, he!"

The man grasped his revolver, suddenly threw it to a level, and pulled trigger.

Lem Luby coolly reined his horses back at the shot and said, without the least show of emotion:

"Yer is a blamed bad shot, fer though that bullet went through my hat brim, it missed my nose four inches."

One of the outlaws quickly said something to the leader in a low tone, and he returned his revolver to his belt, and glanced around upon his men, all of whom had collected about the coach to hear Lem Luby's opinion of the outlaw.

The leader relapsed into silence now, while Lem drove on at a more lively pace, trying, whenever he saw the opportunity, to crowd the Cobras who rode too near his coach wheels, and once unhorsing one, though not hurting him much, for there was no more reckless man on the frontier than was Lem Luby when he got into one of his ugly humors.

"There's ther place I war' held up, make what yer kin out of it," he cried, as he drew up at the spot where Buffalo Bill had left the "signs" of the pretended robbery.

The outlaws sprang from their horses at once.

They saw the strong-box broken open, the tracks in the trail, and the leader said, anxiously:

"Pards, he has told the truth, for here is the proof."

"Now to find out who those men were, for you know that the band under Rattle and our own are all we know of together, and we acted under Captain Cobra's orders, so he cannot have been here."

Lem Luby heard just what was said, and called out:

"I suppose I kin go, now, Snakes?"

"Go!"

Lem waited to hear no more, but turned his coach about and started off at a brisk pace, but, glancing back ere he had gone very far, he uttered a startled exclamation, for he saw a horseman approaching the Cobras.

"If it hain't Buffalo Bill playin' a lone hand as ther chief's messenger, hope I may die; but I can't help him, for I don't dare stop, as it might give ther racket away."

"Oh, pard Bill, let ther angels up yonder perfect you now, fer them devils holds a full hand ag'in' yer."

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

BUFFALO BILL'S BOLD VENTURE.

When Buffalo Bill road away from the spot where he had played such a clever game with Lem Luby, to save his freight from the outlaws, he went for a few miles back in the direction he had come.

It was in his mind to go to the cliff cavern, the secret retreat of the Cobras, which he knew of, and see if it was not there that they had left the treasure of the Taos coach.

The orders from the chief were to this effect, according to the note he had taken from the messenger who had fought him so desperately in the dark.

Buffalo Bill knew that it was but a few miles to the cliff cavern, and so he deemed it best to be on the safe side should he run upon outlaw Rattle or any of the gang.

So he dismounted and began to carefully make his toilet.

He had his comb and brush with him, his razor, a small mirror and the effects taken from the messenger, along with the disguises brought him by Lieutenant Willys from Jack Tobin.

Among the latter there was a wig that had been pawned by a bald-headed man for a bar bill, and the hair was iron gray.

This the scout put on, after he had snugly packed his long hair close to his head.

The Mexican suit of the messenger, and the sombrero added to the disguise, while, having cut off his imperial and taken his mustache down from curling upward at the ends, by the aid of soap, he was a very much disguised man from the handsome, dashing, debonair Buffalo Bill.

Then he blotted his face with some iodine he had in his holster medicine chest and assumed a totally different expression from that natural to him.

Satisfied with his make-up, he mounted his horse and began to look about for a hiding place for the booty he carried.

He was not long in finding the very place, a crevice between two rocks, where all was black below.

Letting the bags down with his lariat, he found a resting place for the booty, and, cutting a vine, he bound it in the crevice, thus hiding the line which held the bag.

Then he set off for the cliff cavern, and was not long in reaching there.

It did not take him long to discover that there was a fresh trail there, doubtless made at early dawn, as the outlaws had pushed through after robbing Ned Nordeck.

There were the tracks of seven horses, which would account for the five Cobras who had been passengers in the coach with Driver Nordeck, and the man who had come to the scene of the hold-up on foot to meet them, with one horse to spare.

The tracks showed that the men had not been very long at the cliff, but had gone off in a direction toward the Fort Summer stage trail.

Buffalo Bill dismounted and approached the entrance to the retreat cautiously.

Having been there once before and seen the secret entrance, he knew well how to gain admission, by means of the trunk of a large tree, which had been hollowed out, and, brought to the spot, had been placed over a hole in the ground and fastened there.

The trunk stood in a thicket, which no one would enter without some good reason, and about the height of the scout's head there was a swinging door cut into the tree, which he opened.

Reaching his hand inside he drew out a short ladder, which enabled him to step up and enter the opening, and drawing it in after him, to descend to the ground within, where there was a hole in the rock.

The props which held the old hollow tree trunk in place furnished a ladder for the descent into a large cave, which opened out into the solid face of the cliff.

Not a soul was within this cavern, as Buffalo Bill could see, but that it was a secret retreat of a band of hunted men there was undoubtedly evidence about him.

Rifles, revolvers and knives hung here and there, and rolls of bedding were scattered about, with cooking utensils, lariats, several lanterns, and a lot of provisions.

There had been a fireplace made of rocks near the opening, and a chimney, from which a stove pipe could be thrust out some feet from the cliff when a fire was needed.

But there was no trace of the treasure he sought, though that the outlaws had been there he had every evidence, for a few embers still burned in the fireplace.

Suddenly the scout said:

"They have a secret hiding place here I know, but how to find it is the question."

"Ah! I have it! They are far from here now, doubtless, but those who are to hold up Ned Nordeck must know, and I will find them, for this disguise and my letter will pass me."

"Anyhow, I'll chance it," and he left the cavern and started back for the stage trail, to come upon the seven outlaws just as Lem Luby was driving away.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

CLEVER DIPLOMACY.

The outlaws started as they saw Buffalo Bill coming through the timber, and were on their guard at once.

But they beheld no one else, and as he came leisurely along toward them he saw that they were masked, so he took a mask from his pocket and held it before his face, as a means of showing that he was one of them.

Not one of the seven men, now grouped together, with arms in their hands, recalled what one of their band the horseman could be, and yet they felt sure there was no mistake, he must be a Cobra.

"Ah! He is one of the men who robbed the coach, and was acting under orders from the chief."

Thus said the leader, and this seemed to be the accepted opinion of all.

Another minute Buffalo Bill had ridden up to the group, and he boldly lowered his mask and asked:

"Is this Rattle's band of men?"

"No; I am Moccasin, and it is my band. Who are you?"

"I am Viper, a new man, and a messenger from Captain Cobra, but I was to seek Rattle, who had orders to hold up the Taos coach."

"Did he do so?"

"Yes, but I was late, so missed him, and took the trail on this way to the secret cavern, but found that he had been there and gone, and knowing that you were to attack the Summer coach, I came on here, thinking Rattle had joined you. Here is my letter to Rattle, if you read Spanish."

The man who had led the outlaws, and called himself Moccasin, took the note and read it, while he said:

"I am half-Mexican, half-American, so speak Spanish as I do English. So you missed Rattle?"

"Yes."

Then Buffalo Bill recalled what Ned Nordeck had told him about the outlaw having said an attack was also to be made upon Lem Luby's coach, and he continued:

"As I shall now go back to tell the chief that Rattle made his haul all right, what shall I tell him from you?"

"I am sorry I cannot send good news; but the truth is the coach was held up before it reached us."

"Three men did it, but who they were we have no idea, and I now begin to fear that they were either traitor Cobras or not of our band."

"Did the captain say anything to you about a third party being out?"

"No, he only ordered you and Rattle to act."

"Then those who robbed the coach were evidently not of the Cobra band, yet may have been the traitor, Lem Nichols, and two others he allied with him, for he was not caught after his act of treachery."

"Can you not trail them from here?" asked Buffalo Bill, innocently, recalling how well he had covered up the tracks of his horse a short distance away.

"Yes, for they must have all been mounted, though the driver of the coach told me there was only one that he saw on horseback."

"And they got all the booty?"

"Every peso."

"What shall I tell the captain?"

"When do you go back?"

"Right away, unless your retreat is near, so I could go there to rest and get a meal."

"Our retreat is thirty miles from here."

"I am a new man, you know, so am not aware of the retreats."

"I am an old friend of the captain, and meeting me, he took me in with him, so I am to ride as messenger."

"How will I find you if he sends me to you?"

"The captain knew of a new retreat, and sent us there, after calling us together again, for you know Buffalo Bill raided our old stronghold."

"Yes, I know."

"The old retreat is a dandy, too, and we are to all stay there to await orders by messenger what to do."

"I won't attempt to go there now, but aren't you afraid of being tracked there by the scouts and soldiers?"

"No, indeed, for we follow the well-beaten trail to the river, and then it is a wade and swim alternately for five miles, and we come out where no soldiers or scouts would suspect or be able to track us."

CHAPTER XL.

THE SCOUT AND THE OUTLAW OFFICER.

"What shall I tell the captain?" asked Buffalo Bill, anxious to no longer delay his departure, as he saw there was no chance of getting to the retreat, and thus learning the way there.

"Tell him I shall at once take the trail of the men who robbed the coach and try to track them down and regain the booty."

"If successful in rescuing what was taken, I shall place it in the secret hiding place of the cliff cavern, and then go to the retreat in the mountains."

"If not successful, I shall also go there with my men to await further orders from him."

"I'll tell him; but I guess you'll find it hard work to find these robbers."

"I am afraid that I will, but I will soon know."

"You are sure that Rattle's band got their booty?"

"They must have done so, for I came to the tracks where the coach had been held up, and their trail led to the secret retreat on the cliff, which Captain Cobra told me how to find."

"Not the trail of all."

"Oh, no; the trail of one horse led there."

"I thought it strange, for only the officers and messengers know of that retreat."

"But if the trail led them there, the booty was left there."

"I am sorry I did not see Rattle, for I had orders to look over the booty and take Captain Cobra a complete list of all that was there."

"See here; come with us to see what we can do in tracking those robbers, and then we'll camp for dinner and you can get rest and food."

"Then I'll start the men to the retreat, and go to the cliff cavern with you, for I know the secret hiding place, and you can make out the list."

"I'll do it."

The men were at once set to work, picking up the trail of the "three robbers" Lem Luby had reported, and after a very close search found only the trail of Buffalo Bill's horse.

This they followed for a mile or more, to suddenly lose it on soil that left no trace of a track.

The disguised scout, playing the part of the outlaw Viper to perfection, helped diligently in the search, smiling within himself as he thought of how he could tell them a secret of how he had ridden across that hard, rocky soil to a brook, entered it, then, with "muslins," which he never went without, had covered the hoofs of his horse, turned him right back out of the brook and riding again over the trackless soil, had gone on his way, leaving no trace of a trail.

Having searched in vain for the trail, Moccasin ordered his men into camp, and they were soon busy getting dinner.

The meal over, horses were saddled up and the men were told to take the trail to the retreat.

"Ride slow, men, for I will try and overtake you, but do not be surprised if I do not, for I may take a notion to go with Viper here and see the captain, so as to clear our skirts for not having gotten that booty."

With this the men rode away toward the northward, evidently greatly chagrined at their failure to get the booty Lem Luby had carried on his coach, but glad, at least, that Rattle and his band had gotten that which was on the way to Taos.

Side by side Buffalo Bill and Moccasin rode, and the former drew a long breath of relief when he felt that he had only one man to deal with instead of seven.

In half an hour they had reached the spot near the secret retreat where the horses were left, and Buffalo Bill, to lull any suspicion, at once led the way, opened the door in the hollow tree, took out the ladder and entered.

But Buffalo Bill was very watchful of the man, who had begun to appear a trifle nervous.

He was a large, athletic fellow, and looked like a very Hercules, while his movements were quick and decided.

Entering the cavern the man said:

"So the captain did not tell you how to find the booty?"

"No, for he expected Rattle, who knows the secret, would be with me."

"True. Now see here!"

They had approached the entrance to the cavern that looked out of the cliff.

It was a splendid view they got there of the country beyond for miles, the river dashing along far below at the base of the cliff, a perfect window, as it were, in the rocky wall.

CHAPTER XL.

THE HIDDEN TREASURE.

The outlaw stood a moment looking out of the opening in the cliff, as though admiring the view, and then said:

"So you don't know how to find the secret hiding place?"

"No."

"Well, it is a good secret, as you will see. It is not in the cavern."

"Where is it?"

"I'll show you."

He stepped back to the dark corner down which the shaft came from above, and brought back with him a stout sapling, with hewn sides, some fifteen feet in length.

Returning to the corner he brought another of the same size and laid both of them with one end pointing out of the cavern opening.

Then he shoved them close against the rocks on either side, the one on the left fitting closely in a niche in the rocky doorway.

Each end extended about three feet out of the opening, and the other ends were then propped hard down by poles put upon them and fitting hard against the ceiling of the cavern.

Buffalo Bill watched the man's movements carefully, and the outlaw worked with a look on his face, for he was unmasked now, as though he delighted in surprising Captain Cobra's new man.

Returning again to the dark corner, the outlaw came back bearing a wide board, or plank.

It was very heavy, for it was twenty feet in length, and the scout aided the outlaw in placing it in position.

This position was in shoving one end out of the opening, resting upon one beam and catching the other under the beam on the left.

This held it in position, one end running out along the face of the cliff for some fifteen feet.

But the outlaw was not yet satisfied, but fastened the end under the prop securely to it with a lariat.

"One has to have a cool head to rig this platform and go out upon it. How is your head?"

"All right."

"I am glad, for I would have to bring you all the booty to see. Do you know there are but two of us in the band now, except the Queen, who know this secret?"

"I have never seen her."

"No, for she is at the retreat now, and the captain will not allow her to ride about as she once did, since Buffalo Bill raided us."

Buffalo Bill congratulated himself that he had found out something about the Queen at last.

Stepping out upon the broad, thick planking, the outlaw said:

"Come, for it will hold half a dozen."

The scout followed unflinchingly, and stood gazing down from the dizzy height at the roaring river beneath him.

The cliff shelved under from the top, and as he followed the outlaw along the dizzy walk, Buffalo Bill saw that there was a slight curve in the rock some six feet from the entrance to the cavern, and the plank was resting against this. Around this curve half a dozen feet he beheld a hole in the rock.

It was some five feet square, and the bottom of it was nearly on a level with the plank.

From the entrance of the cavern, any one looking out could not have seen it on account of the curve in the rock.

To hide it from any one looking up from the plain across the river below, a piece of canvas, a curtain, painted the color of the rock, had been hung, and was securely tied at the bottom.

"The chief found this cave by accident."

"He saw it while riding on the plain one day, and some time after, when on the cliff, beheld the hole in the rock."

"Tying his lasso to a tree he went down it and found this retreat, so made use of it."

"Lowering himself over with a lariat one day, to find a break in the rock where he could hide treasure, he saw this hole, which is a small cave, as you see, half a dozen feet deep only. See?"

He had unfastened the canvas curtain as he spoke, drew it up and revealed the little cave filled with booty.

The scout gazed with interest, for he saw there more than the bags which had been taken from Ned Nordeck.

There were rifles and revolvers, fine Mexican saddles studded with silver; fine silk serapes, and a locked box, iron bound, evidently containing valuables.

But, best of all, there were Ned Nordeck's mail bags and what else had been taken from his coach.

Looking over them in a casual way, Buffalo Bill took a list and said:

"I am ready to go, now."

"All right, we will have to take down the platform, for the chief never leaves that up; in fact, never allows it to be put up in the daytime; but we will soon have it down."

CHAPTER XLII.

A SUSPICION VERIFIED.

Buffalo Bill returned to the cavern from his dizzy position, taking good care to keep a sly watch upon the outlaw to see that he did not slip anything into his pocket of value.

The two set to work to remove the platform, the scout aiding, and noting just how it was done.

Then the two left the place, Buffalo Bill going up last, for he was getting more and more suspicious of the outlaw.

As the latter closed the door behind him and followed Buffalo Bill toward the horses, he said:

"Well, I must be off and report to the chief, and I'll have him understand fully that you were in position and ready, and held up the coach, but the work had already been done, doubtless by this man Lem Nichols you spoke of."

"Yes, for I do not wish the chief to blame me."

"You are going right on to the retreat, I suppose?"

"Yes; I'll overtake my men before night, or at their camp."

"As I am a new man, I wish you'd be good enough to give me an idea of how you get to the retreat."

"You leave the trail at the river, you say?"

"Yes, and go down stream."

"The river is not deep, you know, except in places, but you can watch where the shoals are and follow them, keeping toward the right bank."

"At times you will have to swim your horse from one shoal to another."

"After passing some red cliffs, five miles below the trail crossing, you will see on the right bank three pines growing on a point."

"But swim your horse right for those pines, for there is a break in the rock bank right beneath where you can land, and a split in the cliff which you can enter and ride up to the top, or, rather, lead your horse, for it is a rough climb."

"Once on the top, you can follow the trail to the retreat, which is in Canyon Mountain."

"Thank you, for that is explicit."

"But I forgot to tell you there are rubber pants the chief had made, to draw over your clothes, and they are thoroughly waterproof, coming up to your waist."

"You will find them in the point of rocks, just below the ford, before the water grows deep."

"You are very kind. Good-by."

The scout shook hands with the outlaw, and they parted, Buffalo Bill riding away in the direction of the Taos trail, the other toward the new stronghold of the Cobras.

But Buffalo Bill did not go far before coming to a halt.

"I feel that that fellow is going to loot the cave, and as I intend to do the same, though from a different purpose, I will watch him."

"I'll go back."

With this he dismounted, unsaddled his horse, staked him out, for he wished to give him all the rest he could, and started back on foot.

As he neared the cliff he gave a low chuckle, for his suspicions against the outlaw were verified.

The horse of the Cobra was hitched close up to the cliff, and the rider had already entered the cavern.

CHAPTER XLIII.

WHAT BUFFALO BILL SAW.

Buffalo Bill leaned his rifle against the hollow tree, for the ladder was outside, the bark door swinging open.

Unbuckling his belt of weapons, he took out his bowie knife and one revolver, thrusting the former in his breeches waist-band ready for use.

Then he threw off his coat and hat, and got ready for a desperate struggle if it must come to a fight for life.

Buffalo Bill then stepped into the hollow tree, and slowly began to descend, having softly closed the shutter behind him to leave all dark at the bottom of the shaft.

As a breeze was blowing, the man would doubtless think the door had blown to.

Down the shaft, step by step, the scout went, and, reaching the bottom, he turned, revolver in hand.

Buffalo Bill stood in the shaft, watching and waiting.

Soon the outlaw appeared in the opening, his arms full.

He stepped into the cavern, and, taking up a large pair of thick canvas saddle-bags, evidently made for a pack horse and to carry booty, began to put the different valuable articles in them.

He took great care in packing them away.

But Buffalo Bill made no move to interfere.

The robber returned to the staging and disappeared.

Soon he came back with another armful of booty.

This, too, was packed away more carefully.

A third trip was made, and still more booty was put into the saddle-bags.

But still the outlaw went again.

Returning, he had several repeating rifles in his arms, and half a dozen belts of arms, revolvers, and bowie knives.

"I'll ask him to hold up."

With this Buffalo Bill stepped out into the cavern, walked quickly to the front of the cavern, and stood just across the canvas saddle-bags.

He had thrown off his wig, his long hair had fallen down, and one who had ever seen him before would now not fail to recognize Buffalo Bill.

A moment more, and he heard a step on the staging, and the man appeared in sight, with one of the fine bridles swung over his arm, and a splendid Mexican saddle held in his hands in front of him.

He intended to make an exchange of his own outfit for those he carried, and get all he could.

But as he came in front of the entrance his eyes fell upon the tall form of the scout filling the cave, and with a revolver covering him, while he heard the words:

"Hands up!"

The shock was a terrible one, the despair of failure and death filling the place of triumph and joy.

He dropped the saddle upon the staging and sprang backward for the shelter of the cliff, but he missed his footing, a wild shriek of terror and despair broke from his lips, a shriek that echoed in Buffalo Bill's ears for many a long day, and he fell from the dizzy height and plunged downward to the surging torrent below.

CHAPTER XLIV.

TWO HORSEMEN.

Buffalo Bill, with all his nerve, received a severe shock when he saw the man go backward off of the staging.

He realized that the sudden surprise, the destruction of all his hopes, at beholding him barring his way, had caused the man to momentarily lose his nerve, and, weakening, he had thus fallen.

Springing into the entrance of the cavern, the scout leaned over and looked downward, just as the body struck the water with a loud report.

For fully a minute the scout stood looking from the cavern, and then muttered:

"A frightful death, but preferable to hanging, I should say."

"Now to get away from here, for I do

not care to go through more to-day than has already fallen to my lot."

He stepped out upon the platform, glanced into the little cavity in the rock, and took note of what remained, putting the saddle and bridle back again, for miraculously they had caught on the plank when the outlaw dropped them.

Tying the canvas covering in place again, the scout re-entered the cavern, drew the large canvas saddle-bags, full of booty, back from the entrance, and then set to work to remove the platform from along the face of the cliff.

He closed the door in the tree behind him, leaving all as he had found it, and putting the saddle-bags over his shoulders, he walked toward the outlaw's horse.

It did not take him long to mount and ride away from the cliff retreat, taking the direction where he had left his horse.

Reaching the spot, he saddled up, and then transferred the saddle-bags to the animal he had ridden there, leading him by the reins instead of the stake rope.

His way now lay in the direction of the rock where he had hidden the treasure he had taken from Luby's coach.

This was found without difficulty, drawn up and tied securely upon the pack animal.

It was growing late now, and Buffalo Bill knew that night would overtake him before he got far on his way.

He argued that the night before Lieutenant Willis had been on the ride through to the fort, but would be stopped doubtless by his note on the line stretched across at the ford.

Then he considered that Ned Nordeck had reached the fort by midnight, anyhow, barring accidents, of the night before, and the party of scouts and soldiers had been sent out by Colonel Kane by daylight at least.

This being the case, they would reach the ford by noon of that day, and find the lieutenant awaiting them.

This being done, they would go to his secret camp, as the rendezvous he had appointed to join them, and if he could reach there by the next morning, they would only have to await his coming one night.

He knew Lieutenant Willis well enough to know that if he delayed much longer in reaching the camp, after what he had heard through driver Nordeck, of his intention to go across to the Fort Summer trail to warn Lem Luby of his danger, the officer would fear that harm had befallen him, and at once seek to follow his trail to find out.

So Buffalo Bill pushed on his way, halting near sunset in a little valley where there was a stream of water and good pasture.

Anxious to prepare his horses for the long, hard ride before them, he stripped them of their saddles and bridles to give them complete rest.

Then he set about gathering wood to cook for himself a good supper, anxious to make up by eating what he had lost in sleeping.

The sun was just on the horizon when he saw his horse raise its head quickly and give a low neigh.

Instantly the pipe he was smoking after his supper was cast aside, and he was on the alert for a foe.

Then there rode into sight, two horsemen, and, to his surprise, they approached his camp with their hands raised above their heads as a token of a peaceful mission.

"Cobras, I'll wager high on it, and playing a trick game," muttered the scout, as he stood on guard, watching their approach.

CHAPTER XLV.

AS AN APPARITION FROM THE GRAVE.

Regarding the two men very closely, Buffalo Bill stood ready for their coming.

"They may be gold prospectors, but I guess they are prospecting in men's pockets."

"I've got too big a pocket just now to take any risk," the scout said.

A moment after, as the two horsemen came further into view, Buffalo Bill gave a low whistle.

Then he murmured, in a measured way:

"That surely looks like a case of resurrection, though I never knew the grave to give up its dead before."

"Yes, it is the outlaw Sol Nichols, whom Lieutenant Willis and I saw sentenced to death from the cliff over the outlaws' canyon."

"It is like an apparition from the grave, but I'm not taking chances even with ghosts just now."

The two horsemen had approached very near now, and Buffalo Bill fully recognized the man whom he had seen gambling with Taylor Travis one night at Herders' Ranch and cheating him, and playing with money which Lieutenant Balfour, of Fort Summer, knew had been taken from Captain Baring, and who was then on his track.

In the arrest following the recognition, one of the men present among those taking sides with the accused man, had been killed by Buffalo Bill, and his other companions had thereupon made themselves scarce.

Buffalo Bill and Lieutenant Balfour had found upon the accused man, Sol Nichols, the money and other things taken from Captain Baring, and in taking the prisoner to the fort by Lem Luby's coach, the Cobras had rescued him.

But the rescue had been not to save the man, but to execute him, for, by the laws of the band, he had forfeited his life for having, with a few followers, tried to take the results of the robbery for themselves.

Sentenced to death, as the reader will remember, one of the three guilty men had fallen; to later slip away, for the one who had pulled trigger on him had not aimed to kill.

The brother of Sol Nichols, Lem Nichols by name, had vowed vengeance, and it will be remembered that he held up Lieutenant Willis on the trail to make a compact with him to betray Captain Cobra and his band.

But Buffalo Bill had already discovered all that the man could tell, and struck at the Cobras without the aid of Lem Nichols.

Now the scout saw the two approaching, and though he had never seen Lem Nichols, he could readily guess who he was from his resemblance to Sol Nichols, whom he did know, but had supposed was dead.

The brothers were twins, and strongly alike in face and form, and as they came up Buffalo Bill knew whom he had to deal with, and that Sol Nichols had in some way escaped the death to which he had been sentenced.

They were Cobras now, he knew, and desperate men.

Sol Nichols had a grudge to settle with him for aiding Lieutenant Balfour to arrest him, and they had come there for a purpose.

As aides in hunting down the outlaws he no longer needed them, but he would go slow, find out their game, and see if he could not trump every card the two played against him.

Always refraining from taking human life unless driven to it, though he knew that there must be trouble following their coming, he would not take the slightest advantage, as they came with a show of peace.

But such show he knew well meant treachery upon their part, unless they had more to gain by being true.

Buffalo Bill had cast aside his disguise.

There was no further use for it that he could see, so he had bundled it all up together and tied it upon the pack horse, resuming his own dress, and looking like his old self, save for the sacrificed imperial.

As the men came nearer to his camp, he knew that Sol Nichols must have recognized him.

Perhaps they had been watching him, and had thus laid their plan of action.

There were his horse and the outlaw officer's feeding near.

So thus he stood to face the two brothers, one of whom certainly appeared like an apparition from the grave.

CHAPTER XLVI.

A PAIR OF LIARS.

The two men halted about twenty feet from where the scout stood.

They still held their hands up, and had assumed a most ludicrously innocent look to try and appear honest.

"Well, pard, what is it?"

"Yer is Buffalo Bill?"

"I go by that name."

"We know'd it."

"Yes, and you are Sol Nichols, and the other is a brother, I take it, unless all signs fail."

"Yer has it—we is brothers."

"And you are Sol and Lem Nichols, one of whom I have met, and both of whom I know as members of El Cobra's band."

"You is off ther trail, pard."

"Don't lie to me, Sol Nichols, for I arrested you in Herders' Ranch when Lieutenant Balfour pointed y u out as the intended slayer of Captain Baring, as the one who had killed the driver of the coach, and who had the property he had stolen on him."

"I admits it ail, pard, but you said we is Cobras, and I says no, for we was, but hain't now."

"Ah! you have reformed, eh?"

"Jest so."

"Your close call from death scared you, did it?"

"You knows about it?"

"I know that you and two others were sentenced to be shot by Captain Cobra, and that your brother vowed revenge. But you escaped, it seems."

"Maybe it's my ghost."

"Well, if I shot at you there would be no doubt of it."

"Jest so. We has turned dead ag'in' ther Cobras; they is once more on the trail, and we wants ter jine yer ter run 'em down."

"What do you know?"

"We knows enough ter make terms with you."

"Give me an idea of what you are worth to me."

"What can we tell you?"

"Where are the Cobras now?"

"They is on their way to the retreat."

"Where?"

"It is near the same old stronghold you raided."

"Ah! And their queen?"

"She is there."

"And their captain?"

"He is there too."

"Where did you just come from?"

"The retreat."

"Then you are still Cobras?"

"Oh, no, we was scouting around, but they did not see us."

"Have they been up to any of their lawless deeds of late?"

"Yes; they robbed Lem Luby's coach this morning."

"Get much?"

"I'm thinking so, for they went right for their retreat again."

"How is it, if you know this, I see you coming from just the opposite direction?"

The men both looked confused, but Sol remarked:

"Well, you see, we had started for the fort to see you, but thought we'd better find out all we could, and so turned back to try and discover the secret retreat Captain Cobra has on a cliff some miles back, and the first thing we knew we seen you in camp here."

Buffalo Bill knew that the man was lying, but said:

"That was it, was it?"

"Yas."

"And you, Lem Nichols, were you not afraid to venture to the fort?"

"No; for we thought as how you would perfect us, as we had come ter help yer run down ther Cobras."

"Have you been in Herders' Ranch of late?"

"I has, but Sol hain't, for he is supposed ter be dead, yer know."

"And you have friends there?"

"Yas, for they don't know I was a Cobra."

"How long were you there?"

"Two days."

"Where did you meet your brother?"

"I heerd in ther Ranch from ther man as was ter execute him, but didn't, that he had spared him, as Sol had saved his life time and ag'in."

"So he didn't aim at Sol, as he whis-

pered he wouldn't, and brother fell, though, all thought kilt like ther rest."

"My pard told me Sol had told him ter let me know whar' ter find him, so I got a lot of grub and ammunition, and went out to whar' he were, fer we intended ter run them Cobras."

"I see. But everybody in Herders' Ranch believes that I have gone back to the Northwest, and I heard from good authority that there was much talk about it, so how is it you expected to find me at Fort Taos?"

Again the two men looked confused, and Lem said:

"Well, yer see, we thought if we didn't find you thar' we would Lieutenant Willis, your pard, and he'd be glad ter trade with us."

"Well, you have found me, so what trade have you to offer?"

"Yer see, pard, we has got a great deal ter tell yer, so if yer lets us camp with yer ter-night we'll talk it over, and go back to-morrow ter ther secret retreat we spoke of, and which Sol knows about, show it to yer, and wait until yer hez gone to ther fort for sojers ter march on ter ther Cobras' retreat an' bag 'em all."

"And you expect pardon for what you do?"

"An' some money ter boot."

"All right; I want proof that you know where that secret retreat is, so go and bring me something from there—a serape, a bridle—something to prove you know the place, and when you come back to camp turn in, for I am very tired, and we'll talk it over in the morning."

Buffalo Bill saw the quick glance each man gave the other, and noted how readily they agreed to his proposition.

But he kept his eyes on them until they had ridden off, and then set about spreading his blankets for the night.

CHAPTER XLVII.

PILOT AND COUNTERPLOT.

That the two men had lied to him Buffalo Bill well knew.

They had told him that the new retreat of the Cobras was near the old one, and it was all of forty miles away from it.

They had said that Captain Cobra was in camp, and he knew that he was not.

Their report that the coach had been robbed by the Cobras that morning was but half the truth.

That Lem Nichols had been in Herders' Ranch and thus learned that his brother was not dead might be true, but he certainly had heard also that he (Buffalo Bill) had gone to the Northwest, for Jack Tobin had taken every means to let it be known, and made it the common talk that the scout had not waited long enough to see if El Cobras would renew their lawless acts, as they had disbanded, but not been wiped out.

That the two men had been dogging him, following his trail, he felt sure, and seeing him go into camp, had flanked around and approached from the direction he was traveling, was a part of their game.

He did not believe the two men knew of the secret retreat, for Captain Cobra had allowed only his officers and messenger to know it, as it was there he hid his booty.

Anxious to get the upper hand of the two outlaw brothers, Buffalo Bill planned to do so, and hence had made the proposition he did to them to prove their knowledge of the retreat and bring him word.

This got rid of them, and then he began to arrange for an all-night camp.

In the mean time the two outlaw brothers rode away from the camp with alacrity, just as the sun was setting.

They rode at a canter, and, looking behind them, saw the scout's preparations for camping.

They rode on until the shadows of night gathered about them, but did not drop the glimmer of the little camp fire wholly out of their sight.

They took matters leisurely returning, as the darkness increased, walking and leading their horses, until they got within a quarter of a mile of the scout's camp.

Then they halted, staked out their horses, and sat down on the ground and conversed in low, earnest tones.

Thus one, two, three hours passed away, and then they mounted their horses and rode for the camp.

Going to the little meadowland, they staked their horses out with those of the scout, carrying their saddles up to the camp.

They placed their saddles upon one side of the fire, and began to spread their blankets, one of them remarking to the scout, whose form lay all muffled up near:

"It's only us, pard, for we has got back."

There was no reply, only a movement of the blankets.

Then the two men passed around the fire toward the blanket-enveloped form one on either side, and by a quick motion of their right hands a revolver was leveled downward, and rapidly shot after shot rang out, as bullets were poured down into the form.

But suddenly a dark object fell from the tree over the head of Sol Nichols, striking him a blow that felled him to the ground, while the form of a man dropped feet foremost directly upon the head of Lem Nichols, and he, too, went down.

The blows were stunning, but quick as the movements of a panther, Buffalo Bill sprang from one to the other and seized the remaining revolver from the belt of each, while, placing his foot upon the throat of Sol Nichols, he began to wrap his lariat around him, while he called out sternly:

"If you move, Lem Nichols, I shall kill you!"

To firmly bind Sol Nichols was the work of a minute, and then another lariat was produced, and Lem Nichols came in for his turn.

"So you wished to make terms with me, did you?"

"And you went to the retreat as I asked you to do? And you have reformed?"

"I suspected you, and planned to trap you, for you were two to one."

"I took that log up in the tree to help me out, and it did so, and all the harm you have done is to shoot those blankets full of holes, but they belonged to your old friend, Officer Moccasin, not to me."

"While waiting for you I got a couple of hours' sleep, so feel much rested, and we'll push right on."

"Whar' yer goin'?" growled Sol.

"To the fort."

Fifteen minutes after, Buffalo Bill, with his prisoners bound in their saddles and their horses in lead, along with the pack animal, was on his way to find Lieutenant Willis and his men.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

THE LIEUTENANT'S RIDE.

When he left Herders' Ranch, Lieutenant McKenny Willis was not long in finding out that he had been given a very fine horse by Jack Tobin.

The latter had said that the animal would carry him to Taos in a canter and not feel it, and he pulled hard on the bit as though to prove his master's words.

But the officer was a merciful rider, and he spared the horse all that he could.

At last he drew near the river, and said:

"Well, old fellow, you have brought me along well, so we will go slow now, halt for fifteen minutes on the other side of the stream, and then I will push hard for the fort, if I do not somewhere meet Cody on the trail."

"He will be on hand, I am sure, if he is able to meet me."

As he neared the ford and entered the ravine leading down to the water, the officer drew rein.

Something ahead had caught his own eye and the vision of his horse.

What could it be?

The horse showed some fear of it, and, dismounting, revolver in hand, Lieutenant Willis advanced toward the river to suddenly find a slip of paper fluttering in the wind and tied to a lariat.

"From Cody, I'll wager."

"We'll rest on this side, old horse."

So saying he took the slip of paper from the lariat, untied the latter, and, staking the horse out for a short feed, after un-

saddling him, he went into the thicket and kindled a small fire.

By the firelight he read as follows, interspersing his own comments as he went along:

"M. W."—that's for McKenny Willis—"Met C."—what is C.—ah, yes, the coach, of course—too late—

"That means that the coach was robbed. 'Work had been done. Sent request you were to make'—that is for the men—"by N. N."—Ned Nordeck, of course—"to meet you at this point". Ah! the men are to meet me here, thus saving me a ride to the fort, and as Nordeck got in early, they should be here soon; but now to see what else is said, for Cody has tried to let me alone understand his letter.

"I go on separate trail—B. B. or D. D. will explain, hearing from N. N."

"Now I don't just catch the meaning here, for B. B. stands for Buffalo Bill, and who is D. D.?"

"N. N., is, of course, Ned Nordeck again—by Jove, I have it, for D. D. standing for Dot Driver, the scout, B. B. stands for Brazos Ben, his pard, and Ned Nordeck will explain to them what trail Cody has gone upon."

"Wait in my camp for me."

"That means his secret camp, of course, and the letter is signed S., which stands for scout, and that ends it."

"Now, I'll look over it again."

This he did, and felt sure he had interpreted it correctly.

Then he returned to his horse, after putting out the fire, and was soon after fording the stream, determined to ride slowly on and meet the force he now confidently expected would soon be along.

He had not ridden many miles before he saw that his horse had discovered something ahead, from the way he pricked up his ears.

Halting, he took his field glass and turned it on the trail ahead.

"Yes, they are coming," he muttered, as he saw a dark mass ahead on the trail.

The lieutenant was not long in deciding that the party were his men, for he saw riding in advance two horsemen, the others following a hundred yards behind.

"Ho, Brazos Ben!"

The scouts in advance halted, and in an instant were ready for action, while they recognized the lieutenant now riding toward them, and spurred forward to meet him, one of them calling back to the command:

"Here is Lieutenant Willis."

CHAPTER XLIX.

IN THE SECRET CAMP.

The lieutenant was glad, indeed, to find the force the colonel had sent to him, at the request of Buffalo Bill, through Ned Nordeck.

The sergeant handed him a letter, also from the colonel to him, and he said:

"Sergeant, we will go on now to Cody's secret camp and halt there, as the scout requests, and I can read the colonel's letter then."

"It is now nearly two o'clock, so the rest will help men and horses for the work that may be ahead of us."

"Now what force did the colonel send?"

"Scouts Brazos Ben and Dot Driver, sir, and twelve of their men, with Corporal Mabry and sixteen men under my charge, sir."

"There are four pack horses along, well supplied, and six extra animals, sir."

"Good! It is a good command, and I see that the soldiers and scouts were picked."

"Horses too, sir, for the colonel said you should have the best, as Mr. Cody made that request in his message to him through Driver Nordeck, sir."

"I hope there will be good work for us to do, sergeant, and we will soon know, for Chief Cody is now on the trail," and Lieutenant Willis rode ahead and joined Brazos Ben, who was now guiding alone, Dot Driver having dropped back to the head of the scouts.

"Well, Brazos Ben, I am glad to see you able to be again in the saddle."

"Thank you, lieutenant, and I am glad to be able to be on a scout again."

"May I ask if you have seen Chief Cody, sir?"

"Yesterday, but a long way from here."

"I expected to meet him on the trail, for I came through to-night from Herders' Ranch, but instead I received a note from him at the ford, where he had established a post office; but what trail has he gone upon, for he said Ned Nordeck would post you?"

"One that seemed to worry the colonel, sir, for the safety of Chief Cody, as Ned Nordeck found out, from the men who held up his coach, that Lem Luby's coach was to be robbed also, and so Mr. Cody made the ride through to-night to the other trail to prevent it if he could."

"Oh, that we had known this sooner; but Nordeck was robbed, then?"

"Yes, sir, and I'll tell you the story he told me of it, and how he met Chief Cody afterward."

The story was told of how Ned Nordeck had entertained outlaws unawares, and afterward had come across Buffalo Bill.

The lieutenant listened with the deepest of interest, and then said:

"I do feel anxious about Cody, and yet somehow he always turns up all right."

"He's got that Death Charm, you know, sir."

"Nonsense! He places no confidence whatever in the Death Charm, in fact, puts it to the test at every opportunity."

"And never gets hurt or killed, sir."

"That is true, Brazos Ben. But am I right in thinking Cody's secret camp is up yonder little valley, for I was never there but once?"

"Yes, sir; and we'll soon be there," responded the scout, and ten minutes after the little force rode into Cody's camp.

The scout's own horse and the animal he had gotten from the outlaw known as Viper were staked out by the brook, and the soldiers and men in buckskin were soon busy in camping for the night.

Fires were built, for in that secluded spot they could not be seen a few hundred yards away, and while a soldier spread the lieutenant's blankets, and another took his horse, he read the colonel's letter by the firelight.

It was simply an official communication of Ned Nordeck's report of robbery, and that Buffalo Bill was sure, from what the driver said, he could get the booty back again, as well as prevent Lem Luby's coach from being robbed.

At the scout's request, through Nordeck, the colonel sent the men asked for, and Lieutenant Willis was given full discretion to do as was deemed best in running down the Cobras.

Reading his letter over carefully, Lieutenant Willis turned into his blankets, and the camp was soon still, all being asleep save the soldier and scout on guard for the night.

CHAPTER L.

THE SCOUT ARRIVES.

When the capture of the two outlaw brothers had been made, Buffalo Bill felt that he had won a decided victory.

He congratulated himself that he had made the capture without having to take the life of either one.

He had some difficulty in making the men mount their horses, but when he took out his knife and said that he would use the point freely to make them obey him, they mounted to their saddles and were securely bound there.

When he started on his way he kept his prisoners close up to him, and thus led the way through the night.

Dawn at last came and an exclamation from Sol Nichols caused the scout to look around, and he saw that the canvas treasure bag on the back of the outlaw's horse was what surprised both of them.

"You recognize the bag, do you?"

"Yes, it is Captain Cobra's."

"It's mine, now. Picked it up."

"Thar' wasn't nothin' of value in it if yer picked it up."

"Not when I picked it up, maybe, but I've got some things in it now I prize."

"You has got Officer Moccasin's horse, too, I sees."

"Who is Officer Moccasin?"

"One of ther Cobras."

"I guessed as much."

"He were second officer."

"Who is Rattle?"

"He's first officer."

"Where is he?"

"In the retreat I told you about."

"And Moccasin?"

"He's thar', too, I guesses, unless you've kilt him."

"No, I did not kill him."

"Whar' did yer git his horse?"

"I found him hitched to a tree."

There was a silence of some minutes, and then Lem Nichols asked:

"You is a scout from ther Northwest, hain't yer?"

"Yes."

"What's yer pay?"

"How does that interest you?"

"We wants ter know."

"Well, I get sixty dollars a month as regular pay, with five, ten and twenty dollars a day extra when in any very important and special service; but I suppose you often steal much more at a single hold-up."

"Right you is, and what's more, we hain't squandered our money."

"Then I have done well in roping in two rich bankers."

"We didn't say that, for we hain't our money with us."

"Where is it?"

"That's our business; but if yer wants ter be reasonable, we'll talk to you."

"Go ahead."

"You hain't rich."

"No, indeed, I'm only a poor scout."

"We has got ther dust."

"Well?"

"Now, you has got us dead ter rights."

"Granted."

"You corralled us mighty slick, and yer did right, fer we war' huntin' ye'r scalp hard."

"Yes."

"Now, nobody knows you has us, and we don't want ter hang."

"No."

"We'll hang if yer takes us to Taos."

"Without the shadow of a doubt."

"Lordy! Don't speak so unfeeling."

"Do you wish me to pray with you?"

"No, but we wishes yer ter hear us say that we has money, and though we loves it, we loves life more."

"Yes."

"We c'u'd lead you to ther Cobras' den if yer'd trust us, and we'd like ther revenge o' doin' so; but yer won't."

"No; for you lied to me and sought to kill me."

"I do not need your aid, and will prove it by bringing other Cobras into Taos soon to hang with you."

The men were staggered, but they evidently believed the scout was not deceiving them.

So Sol Nichols said:

"Well, we has been robbin' and gamblin' fer years, and we has got a snug bit o' gold laid by; but if you'll do ther squar' thing by us, and let us go, we'll guide yer ter whar' our bank is, and yer can help yerself."

"Where is it?"

"Hid away in ther Taos and Ranch trail, some twenty miles from here."

"I'll free you after I get the gold you mean."

"Let us free now."

The scout laughed and said:

"We'll camp now for breakfast, and then push on for a camp where I have some friends I wish you to meet."

A halt of an hour was made, the scout getting breakfast, and allowing his prisoners' hands to be freed one at a time.

Then they mounted and rode on again at a more rapid pace.

Coming to the ford, Buffalo Bill saw that his lariat and note to the lieutenant had been taken away.

Crossing the river he pushed on rapidly, for rest was ahead, and in less than an hour dashed into the secret camp, where he was greeted with the wildest

of cheers, Lieutenant Willis setting the example when he saw that he had two prisoners with him.

CHAPTER LI. A USELESS APPEAL.

Buffalo Bill rode into the camp with a smile upon his face, and he politely acknowledged the cheers given him by raising his hat.

But for fear of missing the soldiers and scouts he would have halted, tied his prisoners to a tree, and had several hours' sleep, for the reader will remember how he had been constantly on the go for four days and nights.

The prisoners showed their anxiety in their faces, and they were very pale and nervous.

They began now to see the shadow of the gallows falling upon them.

To Brazos Ben, Dot, and several other scouts their faces were known.

They had been seen about Herders' Ranch time and again, and were regarded as hangers-on, but not suspected of other than gambling and being tough citizens until Sol Nichols had been trapped by Lieutenant Balfour, of Fort Summer, aided by Buffalo Bill.

And all had believed that Sol Nichols had been executed by his comrades in outlawry, when here he was, riding into camp as the prisoner of Buffalo Bill, while along with him was Lem Nichols, the brother who had held up Lieutenant Willis upon the Fort Summer trail and offered to sell his comrades out to him.

All gazed at the scout and his prisoners with interest, and Lieutenant Willis called out:

"Come, Cody, you are just in time to have dinner with me, so turn your prisoners over to Brazos Ben and come along."

"Thank you, sir."

"Here, Brazos Ben, look after these two men, and remember they are Snakes, so watch them well."

"I'll do it, chief," and Brazos Ben led his prisoners away.

Buffalo Bill then had dinner with the Lieutenant, who, seeing that he was worn out and could scarcely keep his eyes open, made him go and lie down, remarking:

"We will talk it all over later, Bill."

The scout dropped upon his blanket, and was at once dead to the world in the deepest of slumbers.

Lieutenant Willis went with Brazos Ben to interview the prisoners, and they both began offering to him to betray their outlaw comrades, if he would pledge them their lives, liberty, and some money.

Lieutenant Willis heard all that they had to say, and replied:

"I leave all to Chief Cody."

"But we can make arrangements with you, sir, as ther scout said he would leave it all ter yer," urged Sol Nichols.

"When he tells me what he wishes I will quickly answer."

"But ef we don't hev' ye'r promise give us right now we won't answer, ef we hang fer it."

"All right; it will be your necks."

The men groaned, for they saw that their appeal was useless.

"I put irons on 'em ther sergeant gave me, sir, as the lariats hurt them," said Brazos Ben.

"That was right, for we wish not to harm them."

"And they had a good dinner, sir, but forgot to bring their appetites along with them."

"They'll eat when they are hungry, Ben."

"Now, which of you is Sol Nichols, for I can hardly tell, though I have seen you both before."

"I'm Sol Nichols."

"I thought you had been shot by Captain Cobra."

"It hain't so, yer sees, though it ain't his fault I'm living."

"How did you escape?"

"I'll tell yer, sir, ef yer'll promise me my life."

"I am not so anxious to know, and make no promises."

"You, Lem Nichols, see that Buffalo

Bill found the outlaw stronghold without calling upon you."

"I wish I'd shot yer ther day I held yer up on ther trail and offered ter make terms with yer," growled Lem Nichols.

"Too late for regrets on that point now."

"Come, Ben, I wish to talk with you," and Brazos Ben followed the officer away on a walk along the stream.

The camp kept very quiet, so as not to disturb the sleeping scout, though nothing short of a shot would have awakened him then.

The afternoon passed away, night came, and at supper time Buffalo Bill arose greatly refreshed, and sat down to enjoy the meal with Lieutenant Willis.

CHAPTER LII.

THE STORY TOLD.

"You certainly rally rapidly, Cody, for when you came in this afternoon you were nearer dead than alive, and now you are yourself again."

Lieutenant McKenny Willis made the remark as he sat at his camp supper with the scout.

"You see, sir, I had ridden considerably over two hundred miles without sleep for nearly four nights, and with but little rest, while I had the strain upon me of the two robberies, and playing outlaw myself in holding up Lem Luby and then in being for a while an El Cobra in Moccasin's band, after which I had a night of it with my two prisoners."

"It is a wonder you are alive, Cody."

"Oh, I'm very much alive, Lieutenant, and ready for another long jaunt, but I wish to tell you just what I did, and then show you what is before us."

"I am most anxious to know, but I saw you needed rest and sleep first of all, so did not ask you anything."

Buffalo Bill had finished his supper and as he and the lieutenant lighted their pipes, he asked:

"Can the sergeant and Brazos Ben also be present, sir, for it will be best to have them know, as we may have to divide our forces."

"Certainly," and the lieutenant ordered Brazos Ben and Sergeant Long to come to his camp.

They were soon there and he said, pleasantly:

"Chief Cody has awakened from the dead, sergeant, and wishes you and Brazos Ben to hear the story he is going to tell me."

Then he continued:

"I went to see your prisoners, Cody, and with Brazos Ben as a witness, had a talk with them."

"They tried to impress upon me that you had arranged with them to betray their outlaw comrades, and no time was to be lost, and all that was wanted was my pledge of setting them free."

"I hope you did not so pledge yourself, sir," said Buffalo Bill, quickly.

"Not I, for I mistrusted them."

After a moment of silence Buffalo Bill went on to say:

"You heard, sir, Ned Nordeck's story of how he was robbed by the men whom he supposed bona fide passengers?"

"Yes, the colonel wrote me, and Sergeant Long and Brazos Ben told me what they knew."

"That was a most clever piece of outlawry."

"It was, sir, and when Ned told me he was almost heartbroken, for they had taken everything."

"I was going to circle around to get their trail, but he happened to tell me that they had said that other Cobras intended to hold up Lem Luby, so I at once decided to try and checkmate them."

"I told Ned not to make known to the colonel about the men we wished, and where I would join them, and came to my secret camp here and got a fresh horse and wrote the note to you, and going to the ford left it there."

"I found it all right, as it frightened my horse, and I built a fire and read it, so went on and met the men."

"That was what I hoped for, sir."

"But I then started for the Fort Summer trail and it was no easy ride, as I went by guess."

"It was a wonderful ride, to make at night."

"I camped on the trail, sir, and I may say really held up Lem Luby and robbed him, for I took all he had, threw out his strong-box empty, and we arranged to have it appear that the Cobras had done the work."

"Then I went off to hide my booty, changed my mind, and returned to the trail just as Lem Luby was driving off, for the outlaws had held him up, and doubting his story about being robbed, had made him return to the scene with them."

"It was well that you had arranged for them."

"Yes, sir; I had half suspected they might, and Luby would be in trouble if there were no signs."

"But there were."

"There were, and as Luby drove away, he saw me and looked half scared to death."

"Where were the outlaws?"

"They were there, sir, for I had arranged my toilet, put on my disguise, and was playing Viper, the Cobra, captain's messenger."

"Bill Cody, you dare death too far," said Lieutenant Willis, sternly.

"You forget my Death Charm, sir."

"Did you wear it?"

"Oh, yes, sir—I was Captain Cobra's messenger, you know," was the smiling reply, and Buffalo Bill went on to tell the whole story of his adventures with the Cobras, his finding the hiding place of the treasure in the cliff cavern, through the treacherous officer Moccasin, and his capture of the two outlaw brothers.

"Now, sir, there is the whole booty taken from Ned Nordeck and Lem Luby, and more, too, that was hidden away in the cliff, for there is a bag of gold dust, and one of jewelry taken from passengers."

"I have told you my story and now I have a plan, as we have gotten the treasure, to capture the robbers."

CHAPTER LIII.

THE SCOUT'S PLAN.

The Lieutenant, Sergeant Long, and Brazos Ben listened with the most rapt attention to the story of Buffalo Bill.

Another man they might have doubted, but not the man whose whole life was made up of acts of heroism.

They had the booty before their eyes as proof.

"Well?"

That was all that Brazos Ben had said, and it expressed volumes from him.

Sergeant Long made no comment, but simply saluted the scout in silence.

As for Lieutenant Willis, he was silent for a moment, and then said:

"Now, Cody, what else?"

"The capture, first, of Captain Cobra, sir."

"Yes; and then?"

"The capture of the Queen of the Gold Trail and her band in her new retreat."

"But who is Captain Cobra?"

"I do not know, sir."

"Where is he?"

"I do not know, sir."

"How are you to find him?"

"I have a guide, sir. One who will lead me to him, sir."

"I do not understand."

"You remember the splendid horse I got from the messenger, Viper?"

"Ah, yes."

"Now, he was comparatively fresh when I captured him, had not been ridden far, and hence came from some of the ranches."

"I see."

"The man Viper came from Old Mexico, from the captain's note, so the horse he rode must have been left, as well tired out, at the ranch where this new animal was secured."

"Now, my plan, Lieutenant Willis, is, of course, subject to your approval to have you, Brazos Ben, two scouts, and the corporal and two soldiers go together, making eight of us in all, for we do not

know what force may be at the ranch where we find Captain Cobra.

"Sergeant Long, with Dot Driver and the rest of the command, can go over across the ford and camp there at a good place I know, and on our way back from the ranches they will be right on our trail to the new retreat of the outlaws."

"Ah!"

"We can pick up the whole force then, sir, and keeping clear of the trails, strike for the new retreat, which I feel certain I can find, getting there before they learn of Captain Cobra's capture, or if we fail to catch him at the ranches, before he learns of the attempt, and we can doubtless bag him with his men."

"The very thing."

"If we fail to find him at one of the ranches, sir, we shall at least know who he is, and if he has gone to Herders' Ranch we can go by and pick him up, sending one of the scouts to tell the sergeant to move across to the Fort Summer trail and meet us, which will save time."

"I see, and a good plan it is."

"Now, sir, we can go to the point where I met Viper, and from there I will ride his horse, giving the animal free rein."

"When we see which way he goes, riding as we will to the place by night, we will the next day, you and I, sir, go with Viper's horse in lead, letting the others follow."

"Yes."

"It is my belief, sir, that the horse will tree the outlaw chief, so to speak, as I have an idea that he is some one who is leading a double life of rancher and Cobra both."

"I begin to think so also, Cody. When do you wish to start?"

"About dawn, sir, so as to make the ride through to Viper's grave before night and have a short rest for our work to follow."

"You hear, sergeant, so arrange accordingly, but say not a word to any one of what our plan is or what you have heard."

The sergeant and Brazos Ben left for their respective camps, the lieutenant and Buffalo Bill turned in, and all was soon silent in the man-hunter's encampment.

CHAPTER LIV.

NORDECK'S SUSPECTED PASSENGERS.

The sun was just rising the next morning when the command pulled out of the little camp.

In the lead rode Buffalo Bill as guide, and Lieutenant Willis was riding with him.

Then came Brazos Ben and the sergeant, and following was the corporal with his sixteen men behind him.

The two prisoners were next, with a scout by the side of each, and Dot Driver followed with the rest of the scouts, the pack horses and extra animals, among the latter being Viper's splendid steed that was yet to play a most important part.

Crossing the ford, they were about to turn off to the right, to go to the camp Buffalo Bill had in view, when Lieutenant Willis recalled the fact that it was "stage day," and Ned Nordeck was about due at the ford.

So they waited by the side of the trail, and soon the coach was discerned far away, coming toward the ford.

"It would be well, sir, for those who might be in the coach not to see the command, as they perhaps would mention it in Herders' Ranch, and I should not be seen either, so you and Brazos Ben could meet Ned Nordeck, sir."

"I am glad you spoke of it, Cody, for you are right," answered the officer, so the little command moved on to the camp Cody had in view, and when the coach crossed the ford only Lieutenant Willis and Brazos Ben were there.

Ned Nordeck gave a signal that he had passengers inside, and drew rein, while those within the coach looked out.

"Well, Nordeck, you have overtaken us, but we will follow you close into Herders' Ranch as soon as my five men, now up in the timber, join us," said the lieutenant.

At his words a broad smile broke over the face of Ned Nordeck, and he replied:

"All right, sir. I shall not drive over

fast, though I came along pretty well to the ford, for I were detained picking up the six gents inside the coach, sir—miners from up Santa Fe way, they tells me, and hoofing it across country, fearing to be robbed."

"Ah, that is it, is it?" and, riding up to the coach, Lieutenant Willis glanced within and said:

"You are miners, then?"

"Yes, sir, and we has our boodle along, and was afraid of riding horseback, or sticking to the trails, for fear ther Cobras we has heard so much about might jump us."

"But we struck ther stage trail, and concluded ter ride from here on," said one of the men.

"Well, you need have no fear now, for the robberies of late have put us on our guard at the fort, and you will be well protected, though you may not see us, and all we wish is for the Cobras to make an attack, for there are more than you see to take care of you."

Then turning to Ned Nordeck, the officer continued:

"You have a valuable freight, driver?"

"Yes, sir; a lot of gold dust came into Taos on the coach from Santa Fe."

"All right, have no fear, it will be safe."

"If not in sight, we will be near enough to aid you."

"Drive on, now," and Lieutenant Willis nodded as he saw that Ned Nordeck had scribbled something on a slip of paper and dropped it over his dashboard into the trail.

The coach rolled on, and the lieutenant and Brazos Ben remained seated upon their horses in the trail, the former remarking:

"Ben, those are Cobras, or they belie their looks."

"Sure, sir, for did you see how scared they looked when they saw us."

"Yes, I saw that Ned Nordeck was in trouble the moment he drove up."

"The coach is out of sight now, so hand me that paper he threw down."

Ben quickly dismounted, and picking up the crumpled paper, handed it to the officer.

Smoothing it out, he read, scrawled with a pencil:

"I picked these pilgrims up six mile back."

"One I kin swear was with t'others that held me up t'other day, and I believes they is Cobras, so stick to me, fer I has thirty thousand in gold dust along."

"Ben, is there not a trail where we can cut the trail off within the next few miles?"

"Yes, sir, down Dry Canyon, for there is no water in it now, and it saves us three miles."

"Good! Buffalo Bill is not over half a mile away, so we will make the ride."

"Come on."

They dashed on after the command, and were not long in overtaking them.

"That explains what Moccasin told me, sir, that there were to be three hold-ups together."

"We can nip this one, too," said the scout, when he had read the driver's note and heard what the lieutenant had to say.

Directing the corporal to take half of his soldiers and the scouts, with the prisoners and pack horses, on to the camp, which Dot Driver knew how to find, the other half of the command dashed away for Dry Canyon to head off the coach.

CHAPTER LV.

IN LUCK.

When Ned Nordeck drove on he wore a different expression from what he had when he came to the ford.

He knew that there was some trouble in the coach.

The men were talking in low, earnest tones, and he sat smiling blandly on the box.

"Nipped, by the great Rio Grande!" he muttered.

"I'm in luck, or I'm a liar."

"Half a hour ago I was as good as robbed, but now I is ther top dog in the bow-wow pickernic."

The road was a trifle rough, after leaving the ford, as Ned had to wind around a small mountain to reach the plain beyond.

It was through the other side of this mountain that Dry Canyon ran, in the summer a cut-off of several miles, but never traveled by the coach in spring and winter.

"Hold on, pard."

Ned drew rein as he was approaching the spot where Dry Canyon came out into the trail.

"What is it?"

"Say, Herders' Ranch are a pretty tough place, hain't it?"

"No more tougher than ther average."

"We has heerd that it is, and we don't want to take our dust in thar' and be robbed of it, so we'll continue to hoof it."

"How so?"

"You has our pay fer ye'r ride, so keep it, and we'll hoof it, givin' Herders' Ranch ther go by, and showin' ourselves in settlements only where we knows honest folks lives in 'em."

"It's your funeral, not mine, so do as yer pleases."

"All right; good-by, and thank yer."

The men had lost no time in getting their traps together, and as they got out of the coach they were suddenly startled by the words:

"Which way, men?"

It was Lieutenant Willis who asked the question.

He was on foot and rose like an apparition from among the rocks, while half a dozen scouts and soldiers appeared coming up, it seemed, from the very ground all around.

The six men did not see the whole force, or they might have thought before they acted.

They saw the officer and several soldiers on one side.

They failed to see other soldiers ahead, and Buffalo Bill and half a dozen scouts in the shadow of the trees behind them.

So they made the mistake of opening fire.

Their fire was a deadly one, for a scout and a soldier dropped dead under it.

But the fire that answered theirs was more deadly, for three of the men were killed and the other three threw up their hands, but one was not quick enough, as Ned Nordeck called out:

"I'm inter this pickernic with both feet."

He fired as he spoke, and the one who had been the leader also fell.

The other two, terribly scared, were quickly seized and put in irons.

"We did not expect a fight, Cody, but a quiet surrender; but they fired first and killed a soldier and one of your scouts."

"Yes, sir; and leave four less of their number to hang."

"Now to see that we made no mistake."

A search of the traps of the pretended miners showed that the alleged "gold dust" were pebbles and sand.

The man whom Ned Nordeck had thought he recognized as one of the band with outlaw officer Rattle, had been killed, but he was sure that it was the same one, while, that no mistake had been made in attacking Ned's passengers, there was proof in the costume the party wore under their miners' garb, while on the body of the chief was found a note in Spanish from Captain Cobra to Adder, as he was called, stating that when word was brought to him from Rattle, stating that the coach had been held up on its run to Taos, he, Adder, was to attack it on the return, when it was known by him, Captain Cobra, that a large sum in gold dust would be sent through from Santa Fe.

The note also stated that the men were then to strike across to the Fort Summer trail, and catch Lem Iuby's coach on its run to Herders' Ranch, as they would have ample time to go back to where they had left their horses and do so, and he, the chief, also knew that a good sum in dust was also to be carried by the stage on that run.

Continuing, the letter stated that if the four attacks arranged were successful, the

Cobras could go into their new retreat and remain in hiding for a couple of months, until the impression was given out that they had been satisfied with their large robberies and had really left the trails.

"A precious letter, this, Cody, and a dead give away of all their plans."

"But we can go on now with our plan, for Lem Luby will be safe, as he goes through to-morrow, and this was the band that intended to hold him up."

"They'll be held up with a rope now," said the delighted Nordeck.

"I will send men back to pick up their horses and take them to camp, while we go on as we intended, Cody, for the sergeant will attend to that and also to burying the dead."

"You, Nordeck, go on your way, now, and report in Herders' Ranch how you were robbed on your return, for we wish it believed that you were."

"I will, lieutenant, and thank yer fer ther chance ter lie," was the reply of the driver, who was greatly tickled over his lucky escape.

CHAPTER LVI.

A HORSE AS A GUIDE.

Sergeant Long was given his instructions to go to the camp Buffalo Bill had decided upon, and to carry the dead with him, and bury them there, while Dot Driver was to go in search of the outlaws' horses.

Buffalo Bill and Lieutenant Willis were now mounted for their ride, both well pleased with the work they had done.

Accompanying them were the corporal and two soldiers, and Brazos Ben and a couple of scouts, and they started off at a good pace, though in heading off the coach as they had, they had not lost much time and had gone hardly over half a mile out of their way.

As Brazos Ben knew every trail in that part of the country, and could "cut corners," as Buffalo Bill said, the latter being new there and with only a general knowledge of the lay of the land, he led the way, and set the pace.

A halt of an hour was made at noon, and then, pushing on, they reached the scene of Buffalo Bill's and Viper's night encounter, while the sun was yet half an hour high.

"You cut corners well, Ben, and saved us miles, as I could see, for when I rode it in the night I had to take the way as I found it," said Buffalo Bill.

They went into camp near the grave of Viper, and after a good supper the outlaw's horse was saddled by Buffalo Bill, and Lieutenant Willis, Brazos Ben, a soldier and a scout mounted to accompany him, leaving the corporal and two others in camp.

Buffalo Bill went to the trail where he had halted Viper, the others following some distance behind, and just in sight in the twilight.

Turning the head of the horse toward the ranches, he said:

"Now, good horse, show us where your home is."

The horse started off at a brisk walk, and getting out of the timber, went into a steady canter, as though he knew just where he was going and was anxious to get there.

The scout reined him back as he seemed inclined to increase his speed, being anxious to go on.

Behind, a short distance, followed Lieutenant Willis and the others, watching the movements of the dumb guide with a great deal of interest.

So the miles were passed over until they had been a couple of hours on their way, and then ahead loomed up a light.

Straight for it went the horse, and soon halted at a gate leading into a ranch.

"This is his home, sir."

"He came direct, even before the light was visible."

"We will return in the morning and investigate, having daytime for our work rather than night, if you deem best, sir."

"I do, Cody, for there is no immediate hurry," responded the lieutenant, and a rapid gallop back to the camp was made.

They were all in their blankets by eleven o'clock, but up again and in the saddle when the sun was rising.

Buffalo Bill and Lieutenant Willis then rode ahead alone, Brazos Ben following with the others, yet not to come in sight of those at the ranch, but to await in a clump of timber a mile away, and await a signal for his approach, if needed, the signal to be a waving of a white handkerchief.

It was about nine o'clock when the lieutenant and the scout reached the gate of the ranch where they had stopped the night before under the guidance of the outlaw's horse.

The same dumb guide was along now, but was not ridden, the scout leading him from the timber where the others had been left in waiting.

When they came to the gate of the ranch they opened it and rode in, Buffalo Bill remarking:

"Now to see if our dumb guide has led us astray."

CHAPTER LVII.

THE COWBOY'S STORY.

The ranch was about the most pretentious in that wild land, and as strongly built as a fort was the large log cabin.

There was an enclosure of some dozen acres surrounding the home cabin and the outhouses near, the fence being a stout stockade, like the forts of the frontier.

A grove was there, a stream ran through the enclosure, grass was plentiful and the fenced-in portion could be used as a corral for horses and cattle in case of a raid by Indians.

In one corner of the enclosure, on the bank of the stream, and sheltered by heavy timber, were the cabins of the cowboys, some eighth of a mile distant from the ranchero's cabin.

A dozen fine horses were running about, and as many cows within the stockade, while there were also a few sheep, chicken, ducks, geese and hogs, giving it a very homelike appearance.

Riding up to the cabin, a hail brought from the detached kitchen a Mexican woman, who appeared to recognize the lieutenant, for she said in broken English:

"Senor will be sorry he not home to see senor officer."

"Where is the senor?" asked the lieutenant.

"He go early to see pretty senorita—come back to-night."

"Thank you; but we picked up this horse on our way."

"Is there no one here to take him?"

"I call my man, Jacinto," and placing her hands to her lips she gave a call, loud, long and winding, the notes as clear as a bugle.

They saw almost immediately a man come out of one of the cowboys' cabins, spring upon a saddled horse and ride rapidly toward them.

"Jacinto come—he know, senor."

"Have senor had breakfast?"

"Yes, thank you."

"Senors stay to dinner?"

"No, thank you, we will go over to the ranch and see your master," assured the lieutenant.

A moment after the horseman came up and the woman met him and said quickly in Spanish:

"The senor officer is a friend of our senor."

The man was a Mexican half-breed, and said, politely, in English:

"The senor is away."

"I am Jacinto, the cowboy chief of ranch, senors."

"We are going to the ranch where your master is visiting, but here is a horse this gentleman picked up and we wish to know if he belongs here, for he was saddled and bridled as you see, and perhaps some harm has befallen his rider."

"Do you know the animal?"

Both Buffalo Bill and Lieutenant Willis saw the start of the man as he glanced at the horse, which before he had not appeared to notice.

He rode up to him, looked him over, and the saddle and bridle, too, and said:

"Yes, senor captain, the horse belongs

here; he is one of the senor's best animals."

"How did he get away, I wonder?"

"A stranger senor came here several days ago, and the senor loaned him his horse to go on with, as he had important business north of here."

"Ah! but can harm have befallen him?"

"Where did the senor find him?"

"Some fifteen miles from here, in a heavy timber, north near the hills."

"Did the senor find him loose and saddled and bridled?"

"Yes," said Buffalo Bill, wishing to relieve the lieutenant of any prevarication they might have to indulge in.

"I found the horse, and he was saddled and bridled as you see."

The Mexican's face showed that he was worried, and said:

"Perhaps his rider was killed on his way back, or maybe the horse got away from him when he halted for rest."

"Yes; but I'll leave the horse with you, as you say he belongs to the senor, and we will tell the ranchero about finding him."

"Please do so, senor, and if his rider does not come in on foot soon, I'll go in search of him."

"No, you had better await the return of the senor, for we are going to come back with him."

"Yes, senor."

"Well, we must be off, so you take the horse."

With this they rode away, and they saw that the Mexican and his wife were talking earnestly together.

"Well, Bill, what do you think?"

"The horse belongs there, sir."

"Beyond a doubt; but do you make anything out of that fact?"

"Yes, sir."

"What?"

"We are on the right track."

"It is hard to believe."

"I have had slight suspicions before sir."

"You know I followed the trail of the Masked Man in Black from the grave on the river to the spot where I met the messenger to the outlaws."

"Yes, but do you believe that the owner of this ranch is your Man in Black?"

"If he is not, sir, he knows him, for the Man in Black was coming directly to this ranch when his trail was lost."

"True, but we will soon know," and the two passed on to the timber, where the others were awaiting them, and upon looking back saw that Jacinto was just leaving the ranch and following their trail.

CHAPTER LVIII.

READY TO SPRING THE TRAP.

"Lieutenant Willis, we must catch that fellow," said Buffalo Bill, as they saw Jacinto come from the ranch and start upon their trail.

"Yes."

"Corporal, ride on with your men into a hiding-place, and Scout Cody and I will see to that fellow."

The corporal rode on with the others, and soon were hidden from view, while Lieutenant Willis and Buffalo Bill followed for a while, and then turned as though to ride back to the ranch.

As they neared the edge of the timber, they saw Jacinto not far away, and coming at a rapid canter.

He saw them, half drew rein, and then came on in a confused way, while he said:

"Lost your way, senors?"

"I feared you would, so came to guide you."

"Thank you, my man."

"We wish you to go with us, so lead the way," responded Lieutenant Willis.

Jacinto showed that he was worried, but rode to the front, and a moment after Lieutenant Willis and Buffalo Bill rode to either side of him, the scout's hand grasped his bridle rein, and two revolvers covered him.

"My man, if you do not wish to die, quietly submit."

"We are going to your master, and you are to go with us."

"Oh, senor, I have done nothing."

"I am not accusing you, only we need you just now," and as Lieutenant Willis spoke Buffalo Bill had disarmed the man.

Soon they came upon the corporal and his party, and the fear of the Mexican was very evident, Brazos Ben remarking:

"I know him, lieutenant, and his name is Jacinto."

"He is known as a bad man in Herders' Ranch."

Having slipped irons upon his wrists which the corporal had along, the party rode rapidly on for two hours, and, reaching a timbered ridge, a halt was made.

"Scout Cody and I will go on as before, and you remain here, corporal, until Brazos Ben sees our signal that tells you are all needed."

"Yes, sir."

"Well, Cody, are you ready?"

"All ready, sir," answered Buffalo Bill, and the two rode out of the timber and directed their way toward a ranch in the distance.

"Now, Cody, we will soon know it all."

"Yes, lieutenant."

"I wish you to act at the proper time and do as you deem best."

"When you are sure of your game do as you deem best, and I will back you up."

With this the two rode out of the timber and followed a well-beaten trail toward the ranch, leaving Brazos Ben and his fellow-scout hidden in a thicket, each with a field glass, to watch them and await a signal.

"It will be a great shock to them all if your suspicions prove to be correct, Cody," said the lieutenant, as they rode along.

"It will indeed, sir."

"But it had better be a severe shock now than wait until it is too late, and their happiness is wrecked."

"You are right."

"I shall feel glad indeed if I can have done anything to prevent so fearful an alternative as appears to be now pending from falling upon that happy family."

"Yes, indeed, sir."

"See, there they are seated upon the piazza."

"Yes, sir, and the ranchero is there, I notice."

"Then our ride is not in vain."

"Here we are at the gate, and, opening it, they rode into the stockade enclosure of Evergreen Ranch.

CHAPTER LIX.

THE ACCUSATION.

The Rose of Evergreen Ranch was about to order her horse for a ride when she saw a horseman coming toward the house.

She took a glass from where it hung upon the piazza, turned it upon the horseman, and said:

"It is he. Now I shall make my charge direct."

She therefore resumed her seat in an easy-chair, picked up a book and pretended to read, though read she did not.

Her manner seemed nervous and ill at ease.

She was seated upon a side of the large cabin that was not the living end, and no one was near her or within call.

She had walked hither when she recognized the coming horseman, and had drawn a seat near to her own.

Near her were the steps that led to the rack where visitors hitched their horses, and before her was a fine view of the surrounding country.

The horseman came along slowly.

He seemed in no hurry, and had not quickened his pace in his long ride across the prairie.

Entering the stockade through the massive gate of logs that hung on weights and rose and lowered by a slight pressure, instead of opening on hinges, he rode up to the hitching rack, dismounted, and, seeing where the maiden was seated, waved his hat to her.

She bowed in return, and approaching, he ascended to the piazza and joined her.

She was now perfectly calm, and received him with a smile and a grasp of the hand.

After some general conversation for a half an hour, he asked her if she would not go for a ride with him.

"Father and mother have gone over to Bender's Ranch to see Mrs. Bender, who is quite ill, and I prefer to await their return," was the reply.

"Suppose we ride and meet them," he asked.

"No; I prefer to remain here."

"Do you remember my last ride?"

"When an attempt to kidnap you was made?"

"Yes; how did you hear of it, for you have not been over since?"

"One of my men told me, and he got it from one of the Evergreen cowboys."

"And you have known it a day or so?"

"Yes; since yesterday morning."

"And only now have come over to congratulate me upon my escape?"

"I have been terribly busy."

"I had supposed my gallant rescuer, Lieutenant Willis, would have told you, for he went over to see you after saving me from the kidnappers."

"Ah, now I think of it, he did so."

"It was afterward that one of my men told me."

"And yet a week ago you professed to love me devotedly, said that you could not live without me, and, because I told you that I did not return your love, but wanted you as my friend, you do not seem to care about the narrow escape I had from being kidnapped."

"I did tell you that I loved you, and I repeat it, for my whole heart is yours."

"But you are a flirt, and led me to hope when you were merely trifling with me."

"You know better, for I never gave you one ray of hope, I never allowed myself to encourage you."

"I liked you, yes, admired you for your brilliant mind, your fine powers of conversation, your accomplishments, while you are certainly a very handsome man, and might win easily any girl who does not read deeper than I do."

"I confess I was jealous of Lieutenant Willis for having rescued you, and thus gained a deep hold upon your gratitude and regard, and that is why I did not come sooner."

"Are you sure that you are giving the right reason?"

"Yes."

"Perfectly sure?"

"What other reason could I have?"

"Shame."

"I do not understand you?"

"I repeat, that your reason for not coming might have been from your feeling of shame."

His face flushed, then paled, and he bit his lips nervously, but replied:

"Your language is still an enigma to me."

"I'll explain then most fully."

"The day the attempt to kidnap me was made there were four kidnappers, one a leader, who escaped, and one other who also made his escape."

"The other two Lieutenant Willis killed, and one in dying made no confession as to who his leader was."

"Now, I caught a glimpse of the leader, though he kept in the background, and I heard his voice, too, telling one of his hirelings to kill my horse to prevent my escape."

"He did so, but just then Lieutenant Willis appeared and rescued me, and the leader escaped."

"I have not told a soul who that leader was, but in my heart I believe he was one who, if he intended no greater wrong toward me, had hired those men to capture me, that he might rescue me from them by pretended gallantry, and risk of life, and thus win my favor, thus win me to revoke my refusal of his offer of marriage, and through gratitude accept him."

"Now I need not tell you just what my opinion is of you, and that I can never regard you now even as a friend. But, see, there are visitors, so show no sign of ill will, and if you have any excuse to offer, make it at another time, for I confess I wish to hear your explanation of what I consider on your part a dastardly act. Oh, it is Lieutenant Willis, and a stranger is with him," and the two horsemen rode up to the hitching rack as Rose Reeves spoke, while the ranchero uttered not a word.

CHAPTER LX.

THE TRAP SPRUNG.

The ranchero's face was pale and his eyes gleamed with an angry light as, at the words of the Rose of Evergreen, he turned and saw the two horsemen, the coming of whom neither the maiden nor he had noticed until they were near the hitching rack.

The ranchero had listened to every word uttered by the young girl, as they branded him as though with a red-hot iron.

He had not once interrupted, not once looked at her.

Making no indignant denial, no defense, had surprised her.

But now, with the coming of guests, whatever the quarrel between the ranchero and Rose Reeves, it must be dropped.

Approaching the house with Buffalo Bill, Lieutenant Willis saw the young girl rise to greet them, and she warmly grasped his hand, with the words:

"I must alone give you welcome, Lieutenant Willis, as my parents are absent on a visit to a neighbor who is ill, but they will soon return."

"I thank you for your welcome, Miss Reeves, and desire to present my particular friend, Chief of Scouts William F. Cody, whom you have heard of as Buffalo Bill."

"Ah, I am most happy indeed to welcome you, Mr. Cody, for indeed I have heard of you many times. You are both acquainted, I believe, with Mr. Taylor Travis."

Taylor Travis had remained back where they had been seated, leaving Rose to advance alone and receive her guests, but as she mentioned his name, he advanced quickly.

Every trace of worry had disappeared from his face, and he extended his hand in a cordial way, while he said:

"Indeed, we have met before, Miss Rose, and I am most happy in meeting both Lieutenant Willis and Chief Cody again."

"I had no idea that you were in this part of the country, gentlemen, you, Mr. Cody, having returned to the Northwest, it was said."

"It was a mistake, Mr. Travis, for as I had not completed the work that brought me to Fort Taos, I remained to do so," said Buffalo Bill, as they all now took seats upon the piazza.

"I thought that you had done your work remarkably well, Mr. Cody, as you drove the Cobras out of the country," remarked Rose.

"Yes, they disbanded after you had ferreted out their stronghold," added Taylor Travis.

"No, that was a blind only, I will not say to have me leave for the Northwest, but to lull suspicion regarding them, have valuable freight sent through on the coaches, and thus be able to make several attacks consecutively and get large rewards."

"You astound me, Mr. Cody."

"Are you aware that they intended doing as you say?" asked Taylor Travis.

"They have made the attacks already, sir, in three different places, holding up Lem Luby's Fort Summer coach, again the Taos coach, driven by Ned Nordeck, and a second time catching the latter driver on his return to Herders' Ranch."

"Can this be possible, Lieutenant Willis?" asked Taylor Travis.

"It is, sir."

"Then the booty gained must have been very large, as the company was expecting no hold-ups."

"The drivers state that they carried very rich cargoes. But this can hardly be interesting, Miss Reeves."

"On the contrary, Lieutenant Willis, I am most deeply interested."

"I suppose, then, that you and Mr. Cody are again on the trail of El Cobras?"

"Yes; and we came to this country to get what aid we could. We just went by your ranch, Travis."

"I regret I was not at home, but command me if I can serve you."

"Thank you, we will," said the officer, while Buffalo Bill remarked:

"By the way, Mr. Travis, we picked up

a horse on our trail, which your man Jacinto said was yours, bearing the saddle and bridle of some friend you loaned him to, he having just come on from Mexico."

"Indeed! and where was the rider?"

"I strongly suspect that harm has befallen him, for there were bloodstains on the saddle, and—"

"My God! Can my poor friend have been murdered?" and Taylor Travis was visibly affected.

"The horse we left with your man, promising to inform you of what had occurred."

"Pardon me, Miss Rose, if I at once return to my home, for the gentleman Mr. Cody speaks of was a very dear friend of mine, and—"

"We will accompany you to your home, Mr. Travis, for we go that trail," and Buffalo Bill arose.

"I shall be happy to have you come, gentlemen, but I shall ride like the wind, and I know the hospitality of this house too well to believe Miss Reeves will allow you to depart before dinner. I must be off at once, for—"

"You will remain here, sir!"

"Hands up!" cried Buffalo Bill, as he covered the ranchero with his revolver, to the utter amazement of the Rose of Evergreen Ranch, while Lieutenant Willis calmly looked on, a smile of triumph hovering about his lips.

CHAPTER LXI.

UNMASKED.

Rose Reeves uttered a slight exclamation of amazement and alarm commingled, but she did not appear like one who was in love with the man whom Buffalo Bill held under cover of his revolver.

The ranchero, as white as though dead, for an instant seemed dazed, and did not raise his hands.

Then he said in a reproachful tone:

"What horrid joke is this, Mr. Cody?"

"It is far from a joke."

"Hold out your hands, or I will shoot you dead in your tracks!"

The man saw the scout's eyes, and reluctantly held one hand out, while he moved the other toward his hip.

"If you place your hand on your revolver, you will never draw it! Obey me!"

Rose Reeves stood calm, white-faced and watchful.

Lieutenant Willis did not move.

The ranchero suddenly held out both hands, and quickly Buffalo Bill snapped a pair of steel manacles upon the wrists.

Then he hastily unbuckled the belt of arms the ranchero wore beneath his riding jacket, and said:

"Sit there, sir!"

Dropping into the seat, the ranchero called out:

"I appeal to you, Miss Reeves! This is your house, and you allow this desperado to insult me thus?"

"Mr. Cody, sir, is an officer of the law. If he is making a mistake, he must be responsible."

"I can do nothing to save you, for an officer of the army, by his presence and silence, upholds the act of Mr. Cody."

The words were quietly uttered, and turning to her in his courteous, but frank way, Buffalo Bill said:

"I owe you an humble apology, Miss Reeves, for creating such a scene in your home, in your presence."

"But this man intended to escape us, and I acted as I did to avoid having to kill him, or be killed by him."

"Of what do you accuse him, sir?"

"I am sorry, Miss Reeves, as he has been an honored guest beneath your roof, to tell you that I accuse him of leading a double life, of being a ranchero honored by those who know him, and secretly of being one of the Cobra band of outlaws."

"What! A Cobra!" cried Rose, excitedly.

"Yes, Miss Reeves."

"It is false! He lies that says so."

"I hope, when you make such a terrible accusation, Mr. Cody, you have the proof."

"I have what is satisfactory proof to me, Miss Reeves, and Lieutenant Willis can say whether he believes as I do or not."

"I believe that he is all that Mr. Cody says, and more," was the officer's reply.

"And you, too, utter a base lie against me!" cried the ranchero.

Lieutenant Willis made no reply, and Buffalo Bill continued:

"I not only accuse you of being a Cobra, sir, but of being Captain Cobra, the chief of the outlaw band."

"Miss Reeves, I deem it my duty to explain to you that I felt confident that the head and front of the Cobras was not an officer in the field with them, that he planned, played the spy, got his information, and told his lieutenants when to strike."

"When the outlaws disbanded I did not believe them sincere, so, instead of going back to the Northwest, I went into a secret camp and turned spy and scout."

"There was a grave upon the river that was kept constantly ready for a victim, and though time and again I filled it up, it was reopened."

"At last the victim came, a gentleman from Alabama, who gave his name as Doctor Edgar Drayton."

"He was booked on Ned Nordeck's coach for Fort Taos, but on the trail near the river the coach was held up by a Masked Man in Black."

"It was not held up for robbery, but for the purpose of a duel to be fought between Doctor Drayton and the Masked Man in Black."

"It was squarely fought, the doctor coming out here by appointment to give satisfaction to this Masked Man."

"The doctor was killed, and investigation showed that he had thrown his life away, for his revolver was a new one and had never been loaded."

"Nordeck drove on, leaving the body with the Masked Man."

"I learned of the strange duel, tracked the Man in Black, and found that he had buried the body in that empty grave."

"Then he had disappeared, and being on foot, I could not follow him, but soon after found that a horseman had visited the grave, and I tracked that horse down this way and met Lieutenant Willis the night he left your home here."

In his calm way Buffalo Bill continued to tell his story, and, pledging Rose Reeves to secrecy, told how the coach robberies had been thwarted, that the Lieutenant, with scouts and soldiers, was aiding him, and he gave a signal that caused Brazos Ben and the others to ride out of their hiding place and come at a gallop toward the house.

He had told of his meeting with Viper, the letter he carried, and how the outlaw's horse had led them to the ranch of Taylor Travis.

Then he continued:

"The man Jacinto told us that it was his master's horse, and that the one he had loaned it to was a friend of his from Mexico."

"That aided me in my suspicion, and when we captured this man Jacinto, who is coming yonder, when he was on his way to look up the body of Viper, we found, upon searching him, a list of cattle and horses on the Travis Ranch, and some instructions."

"Jacinto told us the ranchero had written it, and it was the same handwriting that was on the outlaw Viper's instructions to the man Rattle."

"Here is the Viper note, so if you have any of the writing of Taylor Travis you can satisfy yourself by comparison with this note of instructions written by Captain Cobra."

"I have several notes written me by Mr. Taylor Travis."

"I will get them and see how they compare with the writing of Captain Cobra," and Rose left the piazza.

When she returned in a few minutes, she found the party under the corporal had arrived, bringing with them Jacinto, who glanced despairingly toward the ranchero as they rode up.

CHAPTER LXII.

TO CAPTAIN COBRA'S RANCH.

Resuming, Buffalo Bill said:

"Before you compare the writing, Miss Reeves, permit me to say that all during our conversation about the horse picked up and the acts of the Cobras, both Lieutenant Willis and I closely watched the face of Taylor Travis, and were convinced that we had made no mistake."

"When he attempted to leave for his home, to escape, Lieutenant Willis gave me the signal agreed upon, that he was sure we had made no mistake, and I acted."

"Though I do not now believe, as I regard him closely, and recall the description Ned Nordeck gave me of the Masked Man in Black, that the ranchero is that man, I am willing to stake my life that we have run down Captain Cobra, the outlaw."

"Now see if your letters give still further evidence against him."

Rose Reeves took the note found on Viper, and compared it with her letters.

A mere glance was sufficient, for she said:

"The same hand penned both."

"I wish no further proof of the man's guilt, and I now can understand many of his actions that were blanks to me before, while I wish to say, Lieutenant Willis, that he was the leader of the men who sought to kidnap me, and who disappeared so mysteriously."

"I had just told him I knew him when you gentlemen rode up; but there come my father and mother, I am happy to say."

Lieutenant Willis went to greet the ranchero and his wife, who seemed surprised at the appearance of so many horsemen there.

The story was quickly told, and Taylor Travis was led away by the corporal, who had orders not to allow him to converse with the other prisoner, Jacinto.

Then Mr. and Mrs. Reeves would have it so, that they should remain to dinner, as it was then noon, and Lieutenant Willis and Buffalo Bill sat down with them in the dining room, while a most substantial meal was served to the others out on the piazza.

Immediately after dinner Buffalo Bill suggested that they start, as it was most necessary to get to the ranch of Taylor Travis before an alarm could be given, and then to press on to the retreat of the outlaws before any news should reach Herders' Ranch of Captain Cobra's capture.

It was one o'clock when farewells were said to the ladies, for Mr. Reeves and a couple of his cowboys went on with the party, and at a gallop Buffalo Bill led the way for the Oak Park Ranch.

The horses were kept at a good speed to the timber near the ranch, and there a halt was made and all watched Buffalo Bill while he made a gag and thrust it into the mouth of Captain Cobra, and bound his manacled hands to the saddle horn.

Jacinto was treated the same way, and then the scout said:

"We want no calls, no signals, and to make all appear well, Lieutenant, will you lead with Captain Cobra, so as to make him look like a host conducting friends to his home."

"I will, Cody," was the reply, and the party set out for the ranch.

The wife of Jacinto saw them coming and did not observe the condition of the ranchero or her husband until they halted, and then she gave a wild yell and bolted like a deer for the cowboys' quarters.

But Buffalo Bill's lariat gave a whirl in the air and caught the Mexican woman before she had time to alarm the cowboys.

Instantly Brazos Ben had dragged her into the house, and the cowboy who came at her call, supposing he was wanted, was quickly made a prisoner.

"There are four of my pards out with the cattle, lieutenant; are you going to rope them in, too, and for what, may I ask?" he said.

The gag having been removed from his mouth, Captain Cobra said:

"That man and his four pards are innocent, for only Jacinto and his wife know who and what I am."

"All right; if innocent, they will have nothing to fear."

"Mr. Reeves, you will remain in charge of the ranch, with your two men, for all of the cowboys here must remain prisoners until we finish our work," said Lieutenant Willis.

One of the cowboys from the Reeves Ranch was then sent after the four out with the cattle, and they came in without suspicion of harm, and made no resistance when covered.

"We leave all to you, Mr. Reeves, for you know us," said one.

A search of the cabin had proven to Lieutenant Willis and Buffalo Bill that they had proof enough of the ranchero's guilt to hang a dozen men, and then, mounted upon fresh horses, the very best on the ranch, the party started off, carrying their prisoners, Captain Cobra and Jacinto, with them, the woman and the five cowboys being left to the care of Ranchero Reeves and his two men.

"We must reach the sergeant's camp by midnight, rest until dawn, and then push for the new retreat of the Cobras," said Buffalo Bill, and the men determined not to spare themselves or their horses until the work was finished.

CHAPTER LXIII.

BUFFALO BILL LEADS.

With Buffalo Bill in the lead, and good horses under them, Lieutenant Willis knew that the pace would be a good one, and the others knew it, too.

There was great anxiety on the part of the scout to reach the little command in camp and push for the retreat of the outlaws before in any way word could reach them of the capture of their chief, the failure of their last attempt to rob Ned Nordeck's coach, and that their game of crime was drawing to a close.

For this reason both Buffalo Bill and Lieutenant Willis were anxious to push on.

But they could not go beyond the strength of their horses, and they must remain for hours in the camp when they reached it for rest.

Buffalo Bill's brain was busy, however, and suddenly a thought flashed upon him, and he called back, as he was leading, to ask Lieutenant Willis to please ride up with him.

The officer at once spurred to the front.

"Well, Bill, anything wrong?"

"No, sir; on the contrary, I have an idea I wish to suggest to you."

"Go ahead."

"You know that the coach relay station is about six miles from where the sergeant's camp is."

"Yes."

"As the trail bends around the range it is really nearer to the outlaws' retreat than the camp."

"Well?"

"They keep there some twenty horses, and they are all good ones."

"I know that."

"Now, why can we not push at once for the relay station, and get fresh horses in place of these we ride, while Brazos Ben and another scout make all haste for the camp and tell the sergeant to saddle up and meet us at a point on the trail we are to take?"

"Splendid!"

"By doing this sir, we can by dawn be twenty miles from the camp, and with comparatively fresh horses to push on with."

"The very thing to do, Bill."

"The men can stand it, sir, and will gladly accept the hard work, while, if you wish, you can leave the prisoners at the relay station under guard to await our return."

"No, Bill, we will take them with us, for Captain Cobra is a perfect devil; he has money in plenty, you may be sure, men are human, so can be tempted, and I do not care to risk him in the care of the stock-tenders at the station."

"That is true, sir, so along the prisoner goes with us."

"Yes."

"But I will send Brazos Ben on to tell the sergeant to move at once and head us on the trail, as we go by the relay station."

"By all means, and Brazos Ben will know just where we are to join forces."

"Yes, sir; but not a word is to be said to the stock-tenders of where we are going, as you know we do not know whom we can trust; in fact, it would not be best for me to go on to the sergeant's camp, carrying the prisoners along, so the men then would not see them, and you can get at the relay station fresh horses enough for all of us."

"That would be the better way, Cody, and your horse that you ride now can be carried on to where we join you on the trail, and there staked out somewhere to await our return."

"Yes, sir."

Brazos Ben was called to the front then, the plan explained to him, and he also said it was the best, while he remarked that there was a point ten miles from the sergeant's camp, and seven from the relay station, where the two trails joined and there the separate commands could meet, the first one to arrive waiting for the other.

So Brazos Ben was to go with the lieutenant, the corporal and a soldier, the rest with the prisoners to accompany Buffalo Bill.

Half a mile further on they parted, and Buffalo Bill led on at a still more rapid pace, knowing that he would not have to depend upon the horses they then rode to carry them on to the retreat.

It was just midnight when the scout and his party were challenged by the sentinel at the little camp.

CHAPTER LXIV.

PANTHER PETE.

The sergeant was up, and greeted Buffalo Bill as he dismounted from his horse, and the command was at once called to get ready for the march.

Sergeant Long learned of the capture of Captain Cobra with delight, and was glad to find out that all looked so favorable for the running down of the entire band.

"Our horses are all fresh, sir, and can stand a ride of seventy or eighty miles well at a push, with rest at the other end of the trail, and we can make it without a hitch, never fear," said Sergeant Long.

Then he continued:

"Now, sir, I wish to tell you that there was a visitor to our camp whom I thought best to hold as a prisoner until your return."

"Who is he, sergeant?"

"He is a man who has been to the fort occasionally, and lives the life of a hermit, being a great hunter."

"There are many who say he is one of the outlaw band, and he certainly knows all about them."

"He came into camp yesterday, and wished to see you."

"I told him you were not here, and then he asked to see Lieutenant Willis."

"Telling him also that he was absent, he told me that he had recently made some important discoveries about Captain Cobra and his men, and wished to lend his aid in hunting them down."

"This is strange, indeed; but he may be a spy."

"So I feared, sir, and when he said he would come again, I told him that he must remain, that he could not leave, as he knew of our camp there."

"He made no resistance, said I was right, and asked to have a couple of men go with him to his camp to see to his stock, as he had not expected to be gone long when he left."

"I sent Scout Dot Driver with him, with four other men, fearing a surprise, but he took them to his retreat, and affairs there were as he said."

"Then he mounted a good horse he had and returned with them."

"And is here now?"

"Yes, sir."

"Do you know his name?"

"They call him Panther Pete, sir."

"Ah, I have met him."

"Bring him here, sergeant, and we will have a talk with him."

The sergeant soon returned with the man, and he greeted Buffalo Bill pleasantly.

He was manacled, but did not seem to mind it, and said, without using dialect:

"We have met before, Mr. Cody."

"Yes, when I visited your cabin after I stole your horse for the use of that Lady in Velvet."

"Yes, sir, whom you now know, I believe, to be the Queen of the Trail."

"True, and whom you know well."

"I have cause to, for she once saved my life, and I can never forget her, and regret that she is what she is."

"The leader of a band of outlaws?"

"The unfortunate wife of one of the worst men on earth, the son of a man who was a villain from boyhood."

"Ah, you know Captain Cobra, then, and his antecedents?"

"I know all about him and his blood. I should, for they ruined my life."

There was something about the man that commanded respect and admiration.

"I came here to seek you, Mr. Cody, for I wander this country at will."

"I knew that you had not returned to the Northwest, as reported, though the outlaws believed you had, for I see them often, as they stop at my camp."

"I have a badge, such as you wear, a Death Charm, to protect me, but understand, that does not make me an outlaw any more than it does you."

"There are but three of those pretty Death Charms, one worn by the chief, who, I am told, lost his, the one I wear, and the one you wear, which was given you by the Queen."

"Yours has protected you time and again, for the wearer is spared by every Cobra who sees it."

"A short while since I discovered just who Captain Cobra was, so I at once determined to no longer accept protection from him, but to hunt him down, to lead a force headed by you against him, with the one pledge on your part to let that poor young wife go free, for her kindness to me."

"Captain Cobra has sought time and again to have me act as a spy for him, but I have told him I was no outlaw."

"Driven here to seek a life of seclusion and nurse my sorrows in secret, I yet have been honest in my life, and though thrown in the path of the Cobras, I have not been one of them, and that the Queen knows well, for circumstances have made her what she is, the wife of a man she first loved, but now hates, but what can she do?"

"As there came a climax in my life a while since, and I discovered who and what Captain Cobra was, I determined to hunt him down, but save his young wife."

"For that purpose I came here to your camp to seek you and serve as your guide, for I can lead you to their new retreat."

"Will you trust me, Mr. Cody?"

Buffalo Bill looked the man steadily in the face for a moment, scanned him then from head to foot, and then, to the sergeant's surprise, said:

"Yes, I will trust you, and you can accompany us, for now I know you."

"But I, too, know how to find the new retreat of the outlaws, and I have with me Captain Cobra, his ranchman Jacinto, and three other prisoners, all of whom go with us to see that we find their stronghold."

Panther Pete's whole face changed at the knowledge that Captain Cobra was a prisoner, and at first he seemed fairly stunned, but then he said, earnestly:

"At last! At last my revenge is complete!"

CHAPTER LXV.

KNOWN.

Sergeant Long, surprised at seeing how readily Buffalo Bill believed the story of Panther Pete, was more surprised when the scout told him to take the irons off the prisoner, and said:

"You will ride in the lead with me, Pan-

ther Pete, for we start in a few minutes for the Cobras' retreat."

"Yes, sir, but I wish that you had a few more men."

"Lieutenant Willis and a few more will join us ahead on the trail, and then the Cobra force has been cut down by three killed the other day, their officers Moccasin and messenger Viper that I can account for, those of the band who were kidnappers whom Lieutenant Willis and I know the fate of, besides the chief, Jacinto, and a trio of prisoners the sergeant has here."

"Yes, I think we have men enough for what remain, Panther Pete."

"So do I, and I believe you will find every man you have not accounted for in the retreat, for those were the orders, sir, and so you can make a clean sweep of them."

"That is what I wish to do."

"Are you ready, sergeant?"

"All ready, sir."

"Then we will move," and Buffalo Bill rode to the front with Panther Pete by his side, the sergeant and his soldiers came next, then the pack animals, the prisoners and the scouts bringing up the rear.

The pace set was a good one, and after ten miles the trail came out into a valley where they found Lieutenant Willis and his men awaiting them.

A change to the fresh horses was made, and it was time, for the horses of Buffalo Bill and those who had come on with him from Captain Cobras ranch were about used up.

"I brought Harding, one of the stock-tenders, on with me, Cody, to take the tired horses back to the station, for I know both men there, they being old and faithful soldiers who were honorably discharged a year ago."

"You know best, sir," replied Buffalo Bill, and the stock-tender started slowly back with the worn-out animals.

Then a start was made again, Buffalo Bill leading, with Panther Pete as before, and about whom he had said a few words of explanation to Lieutenant Willis, who had been surprised at seeing the mysterious man with the party.

"I can save you many a mile, sir," said Panther Pete, and Buffalo Bill was not long in finding out that such was the case, as now and then he would turn from the trail on a cut, and would come into it at another point.

"How did you know of the retreat?" asked the scout.

"I have hunted all through there, and when the Cobras told me where they were I knew at once the camp they had selected."

"And they were not afraid to tell you?"

"Not when the Queen had given me her friendship, sir, and I wore the Death Charm."

"But you are against them now?"

"I was against them all the time, sir."

"They are outlaws, I am an honest man, and my conscience often upbraided me for not leading the soldiers against them, but their sweet Queen alone saved them."

It was dawn now, and Buffalo Bill was watching the trail carefully.

He seemed deeply interested in the tracks of Panther Pete's horse, and a certain way he had of biting at the twigs or grass as he went along.

At last he said:

"That horse has peculiar hoof-tracks, they are so long and slim."

"Yes, sir."

"And the shoe is a strange one."

"I am my own blacksmith, Mr. Cody."

"He has a bad habit, Panther Pete, of biting at the bushes as he goes along, often lowering his head and getting a mouthful of grass, and invariably taking his snips on the right side."

"You are very discerning, Mr. Cody."

"I have followed his trail before."

"Indeed, sir; where, may I ask?"

"From a grave on the river down to within a short distance of the ranch of Taylor Travis, whom we now know as El Cobra."

"Ah, you followed me then, sir, when I went there to see his home and how he lived, for I had not known before that the

ranchero Travis was the chief of the Cobras."

"Yes, I trailed you, but was thrown off from tracking you by finding a wounded man, and afterwards meeting Lieutenant Willis."

"Then I had my night fight with Captain Cobra's messenger Viper, and came back to this country on my hunt for the outlaws."

"And a successful one, too, sir."

"Yes."

"But as you know that I tracked you from that grave on the river, have you not something to make known to me?"

After a moment's silence Panther Pete said:

"To you, yes, sir, for you know me now as the Masked Man in Black."

"Yes, I felt sure last night that I had placed you, in spite of your looks now."

"This is a wig I wear, Mr. Cody, and a growing beard, a purposely dirt-streaked face, the false hump on my shoulders, and my present costume, would disguise any man."

"I have proof of that, for I ran the gauntlet in disguise of the Cobras."

"It was you who fought that strange duel, then?"

"Yes."

"Doctor Drayton was my foe from boyhood, for there has been a feud between his family and mine for three generations, and a score of deaths on each side have been the result."

"His grandfather began it by robbing my grandfather of his sweetheart, and a duel followed, and thus continued."

"All knew that some day either Doctor Drayton or I would die by each other's hand, but I would never have pushed the feud had he not done so, and one day fired at me in the streets of a village near our respective homes, when my wife was with me."

"I was badly wounded by one shot, my wife was killed by the other, but by accident."

"A foe of mine had told him I had sworn to kill him at sight, and was looking for him, taking my wife along to protect me."

"This was proven in his favor, so he escaped."

"I recovered, and went abroad, for I had means, and while returning home by way of San Francisco, news reached me that my little daughter had been drowned in the river near my plantation."

"I never returned home; she was all I had left, and, drifting about the West, I at last settled in these wilds as a hermit."

"But now and then I heard from a friend, and Doctor Drayton had said he had driven me out of the country."

"Then I wrote him, challenging him to meet me in a duel."

"He accepted, and a meeting was agreed upon here, and you know the result."

"But a letter I took from his body addressed to me told me he was tired of life and sought to end his existence by my hand."

"He had wronged me greatly, he confessed, for my little daughter had not been drowned, but kidnapped, and he had brought her up, and she had married his son, Taylor Travis Drayton, in Mexico, where she had been reared, and well reared. Taylor Travis had gone wholly to the bad, and the last he had heard of him was that he was an outlaw chief, and his wife was with him."

"Upon reading this, Mr. Cody, I went to the ranch of Taylor Travis, but missed him."

"Now you know me, Tyler Tatnal, as the Masked Man in Black."

"The letter sent East by Colonel Kane which Dr. Drayton wished mailed, has been heard from."

"The colonel wrote the lieutenant that an answer had come, stating that Doctor Drayton had left his large fortune to his son's wife, on condition she would leave her husband, who was spoken of in the letter as T. Travis Drayton, and who could be reached by a letter sent to Morey & Co., bankers, City of Mexico."

"The lieutenant only told me this as we rode together last night, having so much else on our minds to talk over, and I at once connected T. Travis Drayton with Ranchero Taylor Drayton who likewise is the outlaw, Captain Cobra."

"Now, what your future is to be I do not, of course, know; but I see no reason why you and your daughter should be involved in this affair."

"She has always gone masked before the band, and has spoken broken English, while the hair she wears is certainly a wig, since you describe her as being a golden haired girl."

"You, too, are in disguise, and as you are known to the outlaws, you can go on ahead, see your daughter, arrange for her to leave the camp with you, and then we can attack them."

"You say you will live here. If so, and it is your daughter's wish, go with her to Santa Fe, or some other point, traveling undisguised; then come back by stage as Tyler Tatnal and widowed daughter, and dwell at Oak Park Ranch, which is her property, and only the colonel, Lieutenant Willis and I need know who you and your daughter are."

"Mr. Cody, you are a friend, indeed, and there may be some happiness for me at last, in the love and care of my child."

"Call Lieutenant Willis, and I will tell him all as I have told you."

The lieutenant was summoned to the front and heard the whole story.

In sympathy he extended his hand to Tyler Tatnal, and said:

"My friend, Cody often speaks as if from inspiration."

"This is a case in which he has done so, and with your secret known only to the colonel, to Cody and to myself, it will be sacredly kept."

"Go to the ranch by all means, for in Miss Reeves your daughter will find a true friend. There are several other good families dwelling on the ranches, while the forts are not far away, and no one need know Mrs. Drayton as the wife of Tyler Travis, the ranchero road-agent."

With the lieutenant so thoroughly in favor of the scout's plan, it was decided that Tyler Tatnal, still as Panther Pete, should go on ahead to the retreat to see his daughter, and leave with her, presumably to escort her to Captain Cobra; then it was arranged that the command should attack after nightfall.

A halt was made then for breakfast, and when the march was resumed Buffalo Bill rode on ahead, Lieutenant Willis following more leisurely with the others.

It was decided that Buffalo Bill should await the return of Panther Pete and his daughter, learn just how matters stood at the camp, and await the coming of Lieutenant Willis and his men to lead them to raid the raiders.

Panther Pete and his daughter were to keep out of sight of the command, go to the former's lone cabin, get the traps there he needed, remove their disguises, and take the trail for Santa Fe, from which place they were to take the stage to Fort Taos, and, after an interview with Colonel Kane, pretend to purchase the ranch of Taylor Travis.

"Success to you, pard," said Buffalo Bill, as he halted at the river, while Panther Pete, encased in a rubber suit, started on his way to the camp.

An hour after the command came up, and, showing Lieutenant Willis how to follow, Buffalo Bill rode into the river alone, and disappeared far down the stream.

After a halt of a couple of hours, Lieutenant Willis followed with his men, and turning out at the three trees on the cliff, they found Buffalo Bill awaiting them.

CHAPTER LXVI.

RAIDING THE RAIDERS.

Buffalo Bill was deeply impressed with Panther Pete's strange story, and when all had been told he asked if he could call Lieutenant Willis to the front and make it known to him.

"It would be better, and I will tell you why."

Taking the lieutenant apart, Buffalo Bill said:

"They left, sir, not ten minutes ago, and she was as happy as he was."

"They have taken a trail upon this side of the river, and will cross far above and go to his cabin, thence on to Santa Fe."

"There are twenty-two men in camp, the entire outfit of outlaws, except those we can account for, and Rattle is in command."

"They have considerable booty there, and fully four hundred good horses, and as there is no escape from the canyon in which they have their camp, they will either surrender or fight desperately, so we will prepare for the latter."

"Not a man in the command knows the face of their Queen, and she will be safe should any of them escape."

"The Queen told me this and much more, and said it would be well to gag Captain Cobra and the other prisoner, to prevent their shouting out an alarm."

"She had never suspected what her husband was until he brought her here, and even then she did not suspect half the truth, but dwelt on with him until some day when she could escape, and bring all to condign punishment, and Panther Pete, whom she did not know as her father, had been the one she had selected as the man to aid her."

"Now, sir, the men might have a cold supper and a half hour's rest; then we can move, for the camp is three miles from here, and it will be dark by the time we reach there. They keep only a sentinel at the mouth of the canyon, which is a few hundred yards to the camp."

"He will see us; we cannot avoid it; so we will have to shoot him, and then charge up the canyon upon the camp."

"All right, Cody, and we'll win," was the determined reply of the young officer.

The men had their cold supper, the prisoners were gagged, tied to their saddles, their horses hitched together and one man assumed charge of them, to follow in the rear.

Reaching the canyon, they were seen by the sentinel and a challenge given.

It was answered by a shot from Brazos Ben; the bugler sounded the charge, and, with a mighty rush the soldiers and scouts went to the attack, Lieutenant Willis and Buffalo Bill riding side by side in the lead, the soldiers and scouts following two abreast, and the man with the five prisoners bringing up the rear.

With wild yells they were upon the Cobra camp, where a fierce and deadly battle was begun.

CHAPTER LXVII.

CONCLUSION.

The battle was won by the scouts and soldiers, though the Cobras fought with terrific desperation, and would not cry for quarter until three-fourths of their number had fallen.

The survivors were at once made prisoners, and then it was discovered that a bullet had struck Captain Cobra squarely in the forehead, and he hung from his saddle a dead man when the fight ended.

Lieutenant Willis had been slightly wounded, four scouts and two soldiers had been killed, and half a dozen more had received wounds, so the victory was dearly won, but Buffalo Bill had escaped unhurt, though in the thickest of the fray.

No Cobra had fired upon him wearing that Death Charm!

It had been respected by them to the last!

A camp of a couple of days was made in the canyon; and then, the dead having been buried, and carrying the wounded on wooden stretchers, the little command took up its march by easy journeys to Fort Taos.

When they arrived, the welcome they met with gladdened their hearts, and Colonel Kane insisted that Buffalo Bill should remain for a week's visit and rest at the fort, and he could not refuse.

Before his time for leaving arrived, the Santa Fe stage came in one day with Mr.

Tyler Tatnal and his widowed daughter, Mrs. Drayton, who wished to purchase a ranch near the fort.

After an interview with Colonel Kane, the ranch of Taylor Travis was turned over to them, and the colonel sent them to it in an ambulance, Lieutenant Willis and a part of his troop acting as escort, and Buffalo Bill going as guide.

The day before their arrival at the fort the outlaws had been led out and shot, and only then the band of El Cobras ceased to exist.

At Oak Park Ranch, Tyler Tatnal still lives with his beautiful daughter, no one knowing their secret, and though she had scores of visitors, to no one would she give her heart and hand.

At a ranch not many miles away, as distances go in that country, dwells her devoted friend, the Rose of Evergreen, as she is still called, though she married Captain McKenny Willis, who, upon getting his captaincy, for "distinguished services," resigned from the army and settled down as a ranchero, his cowboys being the very men Taylor Travis had had on the ranch, and who were, as they had said, innocent of any knowledge that their employer was Captain Cobra.

The Mexican woman, Jacinto's wife, had made her escape and hastened to return to Old Mexico.

Jack Tobin still holds forth in Herders' Ranch, where he is landlord of a large hotel, and Lem Luby and Ned Nordeck are yet driving the stage trails and astounding passengers with tales of what they know about the country they have grown up with, while Brazos Ben and Dot Driver are scouts up in Arizona to-day.

And Buffalo Bill?

Why ask, when his name is known throughout the world, and, with no Indians to fight, no road-agents to hunt down, no trails to follow, he is so wedded to the life in which he was reared, that he is presenting to the public the thrilling scenes of the Wild West, wherein he was a veritable "chief."

THE END.

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